

FATHERLY ADVICE

LESSONS
IN
LIFE



BOOK OF PROVERBS

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by H. Michael Brewer

Fatherly Advice

Lessons in Life from the Book of Proverbs

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

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Proverbs

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introduction

Men's BIBLE Study

The Reasons for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life. . . .
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture . . .*

These words from “A Brief Statement of Faith,” adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God’s Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word” to each of us (*Book of Order*, PC(U.S.A.), G-14.0516e(2)).

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men’s breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study cells in homes, and many others. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion, it assumes a small group of men (no more than twelve), one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to do study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective.

1. We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2. We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The group has gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas are.

3. We will regard the leader(s) as “first among equals.” Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning.

4. We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit that spoke to the biblical writers now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5. We will listen for “the question behind the question.” Sometimes a man’s gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6. We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7. We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes in the spaces provided for your own answers to questions relating to the study and from time to time sharing with others your answers, even when you worry that they are not the “right” answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the foregoing seven “rules.”

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes to has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. The leaders might also alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of worksheets. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the student think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis for this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. If a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword. During the session the leader may call attention to things in the Afterword when they seem appropriate.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle or around a table rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study together God's word, in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study you will find Scripture quotations. These are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout this study guide, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. A clock figure has been placed in each study to suggest where it might be divided into two sessions. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson exactly as suggested in this study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

Proverbs

INTRODUCTION

“Look before you leap!”
“A stitch in time saves nine.”
“A penny saved is a penny earned.”
“It takes two to make a quarrel.”
“Charity begins at home.”
“A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.”
“Practice makes perfect.”
“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”

I’ll bet you can add to this list of homespun advice without wracking your brain! Along with the things we learn in our formal education, we acquire informally a vast body of knowledge from the school of life. Much of this knowledge is distilled in the pithy verbal nuggets that we call *proverbs*. This is the kind of knowledge in a nutshell that parents are so fond of passing along to their children. Sometimes they refer to it as *common sense*. While the young may resist or ridicule these wise sayings, twenty years later they are likely to catch themselves repeating the very same proverbs to their own children.

In science class we learn the laws of thermodynamics; from Aunt Grace we learn that “a watched pot never boils.” Middle school biology teaches us about animal behavior; our parents teach us that “he who lies down with dogs, will rise with fleas.” The formal educational system prepares us to deal with nature, technology, and making a living; the informal education we receive from parents and mentors prepares us to deal with life.

This is not a new phenomenon. Parents have been trying to pass along hard-learned lessons to the next generation since the dawn of human civilization. In the culture of early Israel and the ancient Near East, this intergenerational training in life was called *wisdom*. The insights and teachings of the wise were highly prized among the people of ancient Israel and neighboring countries. In the Hebrew scriptures we encounter many respected wise people or sages, such as David’s adviser Ahithophel (2 Sam. 16:23) and the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14:1–21). We cannot be certain, but some scholars believe there may actually have been a class of professional wisdom teachers in Israel.

Wisdom in Writing

While many wise sayings are shared orally, the Hebrew scriptures contain three books that are classified as *Wisdom Literature*. Job and Ecclesiastes are included

in that list (along with about a dozen psalms), but Proverbs is the pre-eminent example of Wisdom Literature in the Bible.

As we read through portions of Proverbs together, you can watch for some of the typical characteristics of Wisdom Literature. Proverbs aims at passing along earthy, common-sense experience. Do not look for lofty theology! Belief in God forms a constant backdrop in Proverbs, but human actions and consequences remain on center stage.

The sages of Israel believed that God created an orderly universe, and wisdom consists of learning to live in harmony with God’s order. Foolish behavior—laziness, gluttony, adultery—violates the order of things and brings harmful consequences. If you play with fire, you’ll get burned! On the other hand, wise living—careful speech, diligent work, thrift—brings rewards. It’s easier to row with the current than against it! Wisdom is not simply a body of knowledge, but a way of life that embraces common sense, morality, and service.

The sayings in Proverbs stylistically follow the rules of Hebrew poetry, relying primarily on repetition of similar ideas or the antithesis of dissimilar ideas.

Much of the book’s teaching involves negative examples of the disastrous behavior of the lazy person, the scoffer, the hothead, the mischief maker, and the fool.

Most of the book consists of brief, memorable sayings, ideal for memorizing and repeating. The Wisdom writers were particularly fond of colorful expressions and vivid images. They use frequent examples from nature, illustrating their conviction that God has built wisdom into the very fabric of creation. The sages also enjoyed the use of numbered sayings. Given the pithiness, diversity, and color of Proverbs, there could scarcely be a better book for browsing and grazing!

Who Says?

Where did these sayings come from? Who wrote the Book of Proverbs? When was it written down?

The opening of Proverbs ascribes the book to “Solomon son of David, king of Israel.” This homage to Solomon is understandable in the light of Solomon’s reputation for God-given wisdom (1 Kings 3–4). However, the ascription to Solomon is more honorary than historical.

Very likely, the book does contain sayings that have been preserved from the court of Solomon, but even a

casual reading will reveal that the book of Proverbs is a collection of wisdom from a variety of sources. For instance, a section of proverbs is attributed to someone named Agur (Prov. 30:1–33) and another section that contains the teaching of King Lemuel’s mother (31:1–31). Indeed, Proverbs probably didn’t reach its final written form until postexilic times, several centuries after the reign of Solomon.

The book of Proverbs as we have received it is a grab bag! Some sayings in Proverbs may well be older than Solomon, others are much later. There is evidence of wisdom that grew from the royal court of Israel, and at the other extreme we also find folk wisdom from the popular culture. Some of the proverbs seem to have been inspired or borrowed from the Wisdom tradition of other nations. For example, many scholars believe that Prov. 22:17–23:14 is based on an Egyptian writing called *The Wisdom of Amenemope*. In the words of William Ramsay:

The best one can say, therefore, is that the book of Proverbs is a collection of miscellaneous sayings gathered over a thousand years from kings, advisers to kings, and anonymous sages and from the folk wisdom of Israel and even of its neighbors.¹

Rhyme or Reason?

If the origins of Proverbs constitute a tangled web, so does any attempt to outline the contents of the book. Throughout most of Proverbs, the chapters simply gather unrelated sayings in random bundles. Searching for a particular subject or saying in Proverbs is like trying to find a rubber band in my desk drawer. I know it’s there, but it may take a while to lay my hands on it! This is why our study of Proverbs will require us to flip pages constantly, so that we can bring together sayings on similar topics.

The best we can do is to classify Proverbs by the collections of material that we find there. Based on the headings within Proverbs itself, we may divide the book like this:

The Proverbs of Solomon (1:1–9:18)
The Proverbs of Solomon (10:1–22:16)
The Words of the Wise (22:17–24:22)
Sayings of the Wise (24:23–34)
Proverbs of Solomon that the Officials of King
Hezekiah Copied (25:1–29:27)
The Words of Agur (30:1–33)
The Words of King Lemuel, Taught by His Mother
(31:1–31)

Beyond this rough breakdown, we may point to one further helpful division. Proverbs 10–31 consists of short sayings in no discernible order. Rarely does a single thought carry over two or three verses.

1. William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 166.

The material in the first part of the book is quite different in nature. Proverbs 1–9 includes poems in which verses follow logically after one another. This material develops ideas in greater length and detail than in the latter half of the book. Of special interest in this section are the comparisons between personified wisdom and personified folly—Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly.

A Word to the Wise

Proverbs is a delightful book that will offer rich rewards to those who come with an open mind and a teachable spirit. We must not force Proverbs to yield deep insights on the nature of God or the problem of suffering or the theology of prayer and worship.

Proverbs is an earthy book. But then we are earthy people, and earthy advice can be a great help along the way.

Let’s get started!

Resources

The translation and interpretation of individual proverbs will often differ widely, depending on which version of the Bible is in use. If you wish to pursue particular points in greater depth or gain a fuller understanding of Proverbs as a whole, a number of resources are available. Here are a few that I have found particularly helpful and accessible:

Kenneth T. Aitken, *Daily Study Bible of the Old Testament: Proverbs* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986).

John J. Collins, *Knox Preaching Guides: Proverbs—Ecclesiastes* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980).

God’s Word to the Nations: Proverbs (Cleveland: NET Publishing, 1991).

The HarperCollins Study Bible (NRSV) (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

David A. Hubbard, *The Communicator’s Commentary: Proverbs* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989).

Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1964).

Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: Proverbs* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995).

William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

R. B. Y. Scott, *The Anchor Bible: Proverbs—Ecclesiastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1965).

Marvin E. Tate, Jr., *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Proverbs—Isaiah* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971).

session

Wisdom and

FOLLY

Prov. 1:1–7; 4:10–27; 8:1–9:18



* INTRODUCTION

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

I gaze into the campfire, mesmerized by the crackling pine logs and the sparks rising into the dark. My imagination dances and swirls on the smoke, and I drift across the centuries to a timeless place. In my mind's eye I see myself in a walled garden of rare delight. I follow gravel paths winding through a rainbow of flowers and bushes until I approach a figure seated on a marble bench beside a chuckling fountain.

The Wise One welcomes me with a gesture, and I sit down on the bench. For some reason, I cannot clearly focus on the person beside me. Are the robes regal or humble? Is the face old or young? Is the Wise One a man or a woman? I can't decide. The Wise One dances in my vision like a reflection on running water.

"Teach me wisdom," I say.

"Wisdom is all around you," says the Wise One in a voice strangely like my father's. The hooded figure leans over to point at an ant scurrying across the path. "See how the humble ant provides for itself. Behold the locusts marching in military precision, yet they have no leader to direct them. Think of the badgers, weak and lowly, yet they build their homes among the rocks. The world is made according to the wisdom of God, and all things follow the order established by God in the beginning. Wisdom is living according to the pattern of life that God has ordained."

"How do I find wisdom for myself?" I ask.

"You must seek wisdom as if you were searching for silver," says the Wise One, speaking now in my mother's voice. "You must be as determined to acquire wisdom as you would be to uncover a buried treasure."

"But where do I start?"

The Wise One rises from the bench and leads me through the garden, talking as we go. The voice beside me sounds now like my uncle, now like my grandfather, a blending of tones from a lifetime of teachers.

"Reverence for God is the first step for the wisdom seeker. Understanding the will of God is the only true insight. Much of the wisdom you learn will seem earthy and practical, but in all your ways you must live by God's instructions."

We come to stone steps climbing up the wall that encircles the garden. From the top of the wall we look down on a busy city street.

"There are two paths in life," says the Wise One earnestly. "The path of wisdom leads to life and peace. The other path—the path of folly—is traveled by fools, scoffers, troublemakers, gluttons, and lazy shirkers. The path of folly is a one-way trip to destruction."

"Look," says the Wise One, nodding toward the city street.

I see two women, one on each side of the street. Both are addressing bypassers, inviting them in for hospitality, but there the similarity between the women ends.

The Wise One points at the woman whose lips and eyes are brightly painted. She dresses provocatively and throws her arms around a man on the street. Whispering in his ear, she pulls him toward her door. A crowd gathers to watch, and she waves an invitation for them to join the party.

"That is Dame Folly," says the Wise One with a sad shake of the head. "See how many hurry to her door, even though her home is an open grave."

The other woman is dressed modestly. She calls to people in the street, beckoning them to break bread, to share wine, and to learn good judgment and insight. A few pause to hear her invitation, but most hurry by unheeding.

"Behold Lady Wisdom," the Wise One whispers reverently. "She opens her door to the simple and offers teaching to the ignorant, but not many cross her threshold."

For a while we watch in silence as Lady Wisdom entreats the foolish. Her bearing is noble, and her face is like the face of God.

Finally, the Wise One turns to me and says, "You must choose the path that you will follow. Choose carefully, for your decision will shape the rest of your life."

The vision of the Wise One and the garden of wisdom fades and dances away in the smoke rising from my campfire. I throw another log on the blaze. As the tongues of flame leap higher, I ponder what it means to follow the path of wisdom in this day and age. I wonder if Lady Wisdom is calling my name.

Invite members of the group to recall and share family proverbs or bits of wisdom that they have received from trusted people in their lives. Why have these particular nuggets lodged in memory? Do these old truths still make sense in today's world? Can members of the group share any wise sayings that they would want to pass on to a younger person? Have modern systems of education undermined the need for inherited wisdom?

Have the group read Prov. 1:1–7 and 4:10–27. To underline the poetic style used in Proverbs, you may wish to have a leader read aloud the first half of each verse and the group can read aloud the second half.

Proverbs 1:7 is sometimes understood to be a summation of the philosophy behind Hebrew Wisdom Literature. Compare 1:29 and 9:10. Does Hebrew wisdom depend on intelligence? schooling? age? Why or why not?

Which of the following words seems best to represent what the Bible means by “wisdom”?

Righteousness	Common sense
Prudence	Love
Self-preservation	Teachability
Savvy	Clean living

Why? Can you think of any other words?

Proverbs 4:10–27 is one of many sections of parental advice emphasizing the importance of wisdom. According to this passage, what advantages and rewards await the wise person? What behavior will the wise person avoid?

Hebrew wisdom sees life as a choice between two different paths. Many proverbs juxtapose opposites, as in 4:18–19. In your own experience, what opposites represent the divergent paths of wisdom and folly?

Do you see it as a strength or a weakness to think of life as a series of clear choices between right and wrong? Why?

Lady Wisdom

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

The latter half of the book of Proverbs contains mostly collections of brief, unrelated sayings that are jumbled together with little apparent organization. The earlier chapters of the book contain longer passages in which one verse clearly leads to the next. One of the most intriguing of these longer passages is the “Hymn of Lady Wisdom” in 8:22–31.

On the most basic level, Lady Wisdom is simply a literary device by which wisdom is described in human terms, a technique called *personification*. Uncle Sam and Smokey the Bear are familiar examples of personified concepts.

On a deeper level, some Christians have found in this passage a foreshadowing of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. The translation of a few key words will affect our reading of the passage.

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) renders the opening phrase of 8:22 as, “The LORD created me.” The Hebrew verb translated as “created” might also be taken to mean “conceived, engendered,” an idea that fits well with the birthing image suggested by “brought forth” in verses 24 and 25.

The NRSV translates 8:23 as, “Ages ago I was set up.” However, the verb translated “set up” can also mean “to weave.” A variant of that verb is sometimes used poetically in Hebrew (see Ps. 139:13 and Job 10:11) to describe the weaving of a baby’s tissues and bones within the womb.

Taken together, these phrases suggest that Lady Wisdom was born or begotten of God, not created. However, the translation of this passage is fraught with difficulties, and Christians have hotly debated the proper meaning of these Hebrew words since, at least, the fourth century.



Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask the group to read silently Prov. 8–9. When everyone has finished, ask for a volunteer to read aloud 8:22–31. Or the leader may invite a woman to read the passage on tape, and play the recording at this point.

How does this passage suggest that wisdom is built into the design of the universe?

Do you believe that life turns out better if we live according to certain built-in patterns? If so, can you think of examples?

New Testament writers were certainly influenced by the Hymn of Lady Wisdom. Consider Col. 1:15–17 and John 1:1–5, 10–13. What similarities do you see between these New Testament writings about Christ and the Old Testament description of Lady Wisdom?

Do you find fresh insights about Christ by thinking of him as the Wisdom of God? Share your ideas.

Proverbs 8:18–21 promises wealth and riches to those who follow the path of wisdom. Do you think this is literally true?

Proverbs 9:1–6 describes Lady Wisdom’s sincere invitation to each of us. Can you think of areas of your life in which God is inviting you to grow in wisdom? What stands in the way of your accepting that invitation? You may share this with the group, but only if you wish.

Concluding the Session

Invite each participant to skim over today’s readings from Proverbs, looking for one verse that speaks with particular meaning to him at this moment. After everyone has found a verse, invite each person in turn to read his verse aloud without comment.

You may conclude with a prayerful reading of Ps. 1, a psalm deeply inspired by the wisdom thinking of ancient Israel. Have a leader read the psalm one verse at a time. After each verse, the group may respond, “Lord, lead us in the way of wisdom.”

Afterword

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

—1 Cor. 1:20–25

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.¹

1. “The Road Not Taken,” from *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 105.

Looking Ahead

What does Proverbs have to say about family life? How should parents and children treat each other? What about disciplining children? What is the cornerstone of a healthy marriage? In preparation you may wish to read Prov. 4:1–13, 5:15–23, 6:27–35, 13:1, 13:24, 19:26, 22:6, 23:22, 29:15, 30:17, and 31:10–31.

session *two*

Prov. 4:1-13; 5:15-23; 6:27-35;
13:1; 13:24; 19:26; 22:6; 23:22;
29:15; 30:17; 31:10-31

The Wise Man and HIS FAMILY



* INTRODUCTION

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Dad and I are sitting in the Florida room, a sunny porch with wicker chairs and large windows overlooking the lake. My parents have a beautiful home, and they are quite comfortable in their retirement. However, they didn't always live so well.

"When you were about ten years old," Dad says, "the construction business took a downturn, and we had a real bad year. I had to take any work that came along, and when people know you're down they'll cut your pay just because they've got you over a barrel. I was working seven days a week when I could, from daylight to dark. Your mother would have to massage my arms and legs to help me get out of bed in the mornings. But I still couldn't keep up with our bills.

"The gas company cut off our heat one day, and by the time I got in that night the pipes had frozen. I turned the gas back on and crawled under the house with a torch to thaw the pipes. While I was working, a rat got hold of my leg. I beat it off with the torch. The rat ran off, but the torch broke and I had to use burning newspaper to finish thawing the pipes. By the time I got the water running, I felt like crying.

"Not long after that, the utilities company found out I had turned the gas back on, and they came to the house and took the meter off. I knew where there was a vacant house that had just been finished, so I sneaked over there and borrowed that gas meter and hooked it up to our house.

"I ended up in court over that. It turns out that was a pretty serious offense and the gas company wanted me in jail.

"The judge said, 'Son, did you reconnect your gas with a meter from another house?'

"I said, 'Yes, I did.'

"The judge said, 'Don't you know that's illegal?'

"I said, 'Yes, Your Honor. But my kids were about to freeze to death. If I had it to do over, I'd do the same thing again!'

"The judge looked at me and nodded. Then he turned to the man from the gas company, and he said, 'I'm dismissing this case. You work out a payment schedule with this young man, and I'd better not hear that you've turned his gas off again.'"

Dad falls silent and stares through the window. Perhaps he watches the wild ducks land on the lake, throwing spray into the air. Or maybe he is seeing something long ago and far away. Unconsciously, he rubs his swollen wrist, the legacy of swinging a hammer and pushing a saw for so many years.

"Yeah," he says, "that was a pretty rough winter."

"I don't know how you did it," I say.

He shrugs.

"You do what you have to," he says. "Whatever it takes to care for your family, that's what you do."

I think about my daily efforts to give my wife and daughters the priority they deserve, and I realize how much I have learned from my father. I breathe a silent prayer of thanksgiving for this wise man.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Today's discussion and those in following weeks will gather a number of verses scattered throughout the book of Proverbs. You may invite the group members to leaf through their Bibles, silently reading each verse in turn. Or you may minimize the page turning by assigning several different verses to each man. After finding and reviewing those verses, each person may read his passage aloud to the group.

In whatever manner seems most appropriate, invite your group to read Prov. 4:1-13, 13:24, 22:6, and 29:15.

Based on the teaching of Proverbs, what do parents owe to their children?

Proverbs reflects ancient culture in its encouragement of physical punishment of children. But Proverbs also offers alternatives to the rod. Consider the following:

- the Hebrew word for “reproof” (29:15) suggests the kind of rational and well-reasoned persuasion that a lawyer might present in a legal case;
- the Hebrew word for “train” (22:6) elsewhere means to dedicate to God, as in 1 Kings 8:63;
- the literal translation of Prov. 22:6 is, “Train a child according to his (the child’s) way,” which suggests respect for the individuality and particular needs of the child; and
- Proverbs 4:3–4, 11 encourages gentleness and personal example as a means of teaching children.

Taking these verses together, how would you summarize the Wisdom teaching about raising children?

What is the difference between punishment and discipline?

Proverbs 29:15 gives the impression that an undisciplined child is a neglected child. Why do children need teaching, guidance, and discipline from parents?

In the light of 13:1, 23:22, 30:17, 19:26, what do children owe to their parents?

Wisdom teaching often holds up ideal models of behavior. When, if ever, is it appropriate for a child to disobey parents or disregard their wishes?

Husbands and Wives

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

The bond between husband and wife is one of the most fundamental ties in human society. Not surprisingly, the Wisdom teachers had strong opinions on the subject. Whatever else may be necessary in a healthy marriage, loyalty and faithfulness are paramount. Disregard of the marriage vows is a path that leads to ruin and chaos.

While Proverbs is mostly written from the male perspective, the wife’s importance in the household is stressed again and again. The closing chapter of Proverbs paints a portrait of a remarkably self-sufficient and “liberated” wife. Here is a woman who is a true partner, and not just a junior assistant to her husband’s whims.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Proverbs 5:15–23 urges marital fidelity in the strongest terms. Sometimes we suggest that consenting adults should be free to do whatever pleases them, but how does verse 21 contradict this thinking?

Proverbs condemns adultery so loudly and so often that it must have been a serious problem in those days. Is it still a serious problem in our own day? Why or why not?

Why do you think the Wisdom teacher refers to “the wife of your youth” in 5:18?

The potential results of unfaithfulness are spelled out in Prov. 6:27–35. Do you think these are realistic warnings or is the teacher exaggerating?

Proverbs 6:27–28 gives us a vivid metaphor. How would you phrase this warning in modern language?

Proverbs 31:10–31 describes an ideal wife. List five attributes of this woman that seem most important to you.

How many of these attributes do you think should also apply to the ideal husband?

Concluding the Session

As a result of our discussion of wisdom and the family, is there anything you feel challenged to change in your own relationships with loved ones? Without pressure, invite members of the group to share thoughts about things they may wish to do differently in family life.

You may close with this prayer.

God of all wisdom, you have set us in families and blessed us with relationships so that we do not stand alone in life. Teach us to love each other in practical ways. Help us learn the lessons of compassion, faithfulness, gentleness, and understanding, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Afterword

A loose woman—now know I speak sooth—
Can't compare with the wife of your youth;
Though her lips drip with honey,
The aftertaste's funny
And bitter as soured vermouth.¹

While Woodrow Wilson was president of Princeton University, he is reported to have made this speech to a group of parents.

I get many letters from you parents about your children. You want to know why we people up here in Princeton can't make more out of them and do more for them. Let me tell you the reason we can't. It may shock you just a little, but I am not trying to be rude. The reason is that they are your sons, reared in your homes, blood of your blood, bone of your bone. They have absorbed the ideals of your homes. You have formed and fashioned them. They are your sons. In those malleable, moldable years of their lives you have forever left your imprint upon them.²

Looking Ahead

How does the wise man relate to his friends and neighbors? What are the signs of true friendship? What is required for a friendship to remain healthy and strong? In preparation for next week's discussion, you may wish to read Prov. 3:27–30, 10:12, 11:25, 14:21, 16:28, 17:9, 17:17, 18:24, 21:10, 25:9–10, 25:17, 26:18–19, 27:6, 27:10, 27:14, 27:17, 28:23, and 29:5.

1. D. R. Bensen, *Biblical Limericks* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986).

2. Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations* (Rockville, MD: Assurance Publishers, 1984), p. 960.

session *three*

The Wise Man and

HIS NEIGHBORS

Prov. 3:27-30; 10:12; 11:25;
14:21; 16:28; 17:9; 17:17; 18:24;
21:10; 25:9-10; 25:17; 26:18-19;
27:6; 27:10; 27:14; 27:17; 28:23; 29:5



* INTRODUCTION

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Fred, my father-in-law, is a farmer. His nearest neighbors aren't all that near, so Fred works at being a good neighbor. I grew up in suburbs where neighbors were plentiful, but genuine neighborliness was rare. By watching Fred, I have learned what neighborliness looks like.

Neighborliness is a roaring chainsaw chewing through fallen limbs and toppled tree trunks after the tornado passes through.

Neighborliness is finding a few jobs around the farm for someone who needs work.

Neighborliness is a cardboard box with fresh tomatoes, cabbage, and corn from the garden. "Thought you might want this. We've got more than we know what to do with this year."

Neighborliness is hanging a storm door or helping to build a barn.

Neighborliness is baling hay for the fellow down the road who's laid up after a heart attack.

Neighborliness is rounding up a stray cow and calling the owner.

Neighborliness is helping to pay college expenses for a family whose dollars are tight.

There's never any fanfare involved. Neighborliness is a matter-of-fact affair with Fred. I wonder what he would say if I asked him why he goes out of his way to help other people.

Maybe he would say:

"I just treat other people the way I'd want them to treat me."

Or maybe he would shrug and tell me:

"This is what neighbors do. This is how you get along. You help a fella out when he's having a hard time. Maybe there'll come a time when somebody helps you."

Or he might even speak from his faith:

"Jesus said, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.'" Then he'd lift his hands as if that settled the matter.

Fred probably wouldn't talk about wisdom, but a wise man knows how to treat his neighbors.

Being a friend to the people around you is more than kindness. Neighborliness is wisdom in action.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

As you begin today's session, ask the participants to think of someone who has been a true friend or a good neighbor. (In Proverbs the most common word for "friend" also means "neighbor.") They might recall a relationship of many years or one critical moment when another person gave much-needed help. Either on newsprint or in discussion, come up with a list of attributes that help to define a good neighbor or friend. The group may keep this list in mind as they turn to Proverbs and the Wisdom teaching on friendship and neighborliness.

Ask for volunteers to read aloud the following passages from Proverbs: 3:27-30, 14:21, 27:10, 25:17, 26:18-19, 27:14. Taken together, these verses deal with helpfulness and consideration. Allow the group a few minutes to compare the teaching of these proverbs with their own listing of the attributes of friendship.

Review Prov. 3:27-30 and list below three teachings about how neighbors should treat one another:

Do you think it best to wait until someone has asked for your help, or should you offer help whenever you see a need? Why?

As you reflect on your own neighbors and friends, what kind of good is within your power? How have you helped others? How might you do so?

Proverbs 14:21 speaks of kindness to the poor. The poor are mentioned quite often in Proverbs. Given the practical nature of this book, perhaps we should broadly define the poor as anyone who is in need of help. If so, how might you apply this verse in your life?

According to some commentators, the Hebrew word for “madman” in Prov. 26:18–19 might mean “practical joker.” At any rate, the person who deals dishonestly and callously with his neighbor is compared to someone who throws flaming brands. Do you think that is a good comparison? Explain.

“Better is a neighbor who is nearby than kindred who are far away,” says Prov. 27:10. Does proximity create responsibility? Do you feel an obligation to help someone just because they live near you or work beside you? Why or why not?

Much of the teaching in Proverbs consists of negative examples. From what you have read so far, how would you describe the bad neighbor or the unfaithful friend?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Constancy, Honesty, and Forgiveness

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Along with a general attitude of helpfulness and consideration, the sages lifted up at least three other important aspects of friendship. These form a kind of tripod of friendship. Take away any one of these and the friendship may not stand.

Constancy is commitment for the long haul. Friends do not blow hot and cold. The friendship envisioned by the Wisdom teachers is a solid and reliable rock amid the uncertainties of life.

Honesty is not always easy, especially with people we truly care about. We don't want to offend or cause pain, but true friendship will run the risk of loving honesty and tactful truthfulness, all for the good of the other.

Forgiveness is the healing oil that keeps relationships healthy and flexible. All people make mistakes, and sometimes those mistakes are hurtful. Neighborliness looks for a way to forgive. Friendship seeks a way to restore what is strained or broken.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

The group may read silently Prov. 10:12, 11:25, 16:28, 17:9, 17:17, 18:24, 21:10, 25:9–10, 27:6, 27:17, 28:23, and 29:5.

How would you distinguish between a true friendship and a superficial one?

Have you ever felt the need to express a hard truth to a friend? If so, how did it turn out?

Have you ever had a close friendship that came to an end? Why did that happen? In your opinion, what kind of maintenance does a friendship require?

When you have a problem with a friend, do you feel it is better to confront the issue or to keep your peace? Explain.

The sage tells us that “love covers all offenses” (Prov. 10:12; see 1 Peter 4:8). What does it mean to you to “cover” someone's offenses? Does 17:9 help to interpret this passage?

Are there wrongs that cannot or should not be forgiven between friends? Explain your thinking.

Does Prov. 27:17 suggest another criterion for judging a friendship?

In light of our discussion of friendship and neighborliness, how would you interpret Prov. 11:25?

Concluding the Session

Return to your written or oral list of the attributes of friendship. Would you make any changes in that list in the light of what Proverbs says about friendship? Which items on that list seem the most important?

Ask the men if they have friendships that are currently in need of forgiveness, honesty, or renewed commitment. Anyone who wishes may share his thoughts. Encourage each man to make a commitment to address a friendship-in-need in the week ahead.

You may close with this prayer:

Christ our Friend, you came a long way to become our neighbor. As we experience your faithful, forgiving love, help us to be good neighbors to each other so that we may build each other up in a community of caring. Amen.

Afterword

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don't stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven't hoed,
And shout from where I am, "What is it?"
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.¹

"If you have an unpleasant neighbor, the odds are that he does too."

"The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people."

"A friend is a person who does his knocking before he enters instead of after he leaves."²

Looking Ahead

Is work a blessing or a curse? Should we embrace work or avoid it as much as possible? What kind of rewards can we expect from our efforts? If you wish to prepare beforehand, the next discussion will focus on Prov. 6:6–11, 10:3–5, 10:26, 12:11, 12:24, 12:27, 13:23, 14:23, 16:26, 18:9, 21:25, 24:30–34, and 26:13–15.

1. "A Time to Talk," from *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 124.

2. *Quotable Quotations*, compiled by Lloyd Cory. © 1985, SP Publications, Inc. World rights reserved. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985, pp. 147, 262.

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Prov. 6:6–11; 10:3–5; 10:26; 12:11; 12:24;
12:27; 13:23; 14:23; 16:26; 18:9; 21:25;
24:30–34; 26:13–15

The Wise Man and DILIGENCE



* INTRODUCTION

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Don and I are walking down the sidewalk, passing the front yards of the modest homes in Highland Park. Don is my grandfather by marriage. He's a big man. He doesn't get as much exercise as he used to, so he's put on some weight. He smiles a lot, and laughs often. He's always got a joke, or a quarter for a couple of comic books.

Don used to be a truck driver, but that was before the accident. Don doesn't drive anymore.

Don is blind.

He rides the bus home from work, and today I met him at the bus stop. His red and white cane is folded up and stowed in his coat pocket, and he keeps one hand on my elbow as we walk along. Occasionally I warn him of a curb or a crack in the sidewalk, but I doubt if he really needs my help.

We're carrying on a lively conversation, but Don has a knack for judging distance. I don't know if he counts steps or has unseen landmarks that guide him. As a prank, I try to walk him past his house, but he stops in front of the gate with a smile.

He says, "You wouldn't be trying to pull the wool over my eyes, would you?"

We go into the house, and after Don has greeted Pepper, the beautiful black Labrador retriever guide dog, Don fixes soft drinks for us and we sit down at the kitchen table to play 500 Rummy. I am fascinated by the Braille playing cards. They are thick, and the draw pile tends to fall over. I wish I knew Braille, but learning to read by touch seems like an impossible task. I wonder how Don can remember which cards are on the discard pile and which ones I have spread. He wins about half the time.

I am impressed by what Don routinely accomplishes and fascinated by his adaptations. The open-face watch. The currency of different denominations kept in different pockets. The fingertip over the edge of the glass to judge when the glass is filled. The uncanny sense of smell. The acute hearing.

He rarely speaks about his blindness, unless he is making some joke. He doesn't whine about his disability;

he simply deals with it. The first time he ran fingers over my face to discern my appearance, I felt I was in the presence of something heroic and holy.

I still feel that way when I think of Don. There is nothing pitiable in this man. His life is a lesson in perseverance, determination, and hard work.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask one person to read aloud Prov. 6:6–11 and another to read Prov. 26:13–15. A third reader may share Prov. 24:30–34.

According to Prov. 6:6–11, even the lowly ant understands the need for fruitful labor. The Wisdom teacher believes the need to work is built into the very fabric of creation. Do you agree? Why or why not?

The loafer can always find excuses for not working, no matter how ridiculous. Can you think of legitimate reasons for refusing to work?

Do you know anyone who has insisted on working to support themselves in spite of serious obstacles and personal disadvantages?

Although the Wisdom teacher loves to poke fun at the shirker, the results of laziness are altogether sobering. The neglected vineyard of 24:30–34 is a sinful squandering of God-given resources and an invitation to the hardship of poverty. Do you know of any circumstances in which laziness has led to costly losses?

In the teaching of Proverbs, laziness is destructive. Consider 10:26, 18:9, and 21:25. Why do you think a slacker is compared to a vandal in 18:9?

The verses above remind us that it is not only the loafer who suffers personally for his laziness, but others are also drawn into his web—employers, coworkers, family members. Can you think of occasions when innocent people have been hurt or deprived by the laziness of someone else?

The Reasons and Rewards for Work

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Is there any working person who hasn't glared at the alarm clock on a Monday morning and wished momentarily for a life of pampered ease? Probably not! Many of us have a love/hate relationship with our daily work. On the one hand, we love to complain about the pressures and the unrealistic demands placed on us. At the same time, we also find fulfillment, purpose, and pride in our work. No wonder so many people count the days to retirement, only to feel lost at sea when they leave the workplace behind.

The Wisdom teacher repeatedly praises the diligent person. In Proverbs, *diligence* describes an approach to work that is thoughtful, focused, persistent, and determined to succeed. Anyone can go through the motions; the diligent person puts heart and mind into the job at hand, and is rewarded accordingly.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask the group to read silently or aloud several verses that have to do with a wise approach to work: 10:3–5, 12:11, 12:24, 12:27, 13:23, 14:23, 16:26.

As you consider these passages, what reasons do you find for useful human labor? Can you add other reasons to the list?

In John 5:17, Jesus said, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." How do you think the Wisdom teacher would feel about that reason for working?

According to Proverbs, what are the likely rewards of diligence and honest effort?

Remember that Proverbs offers rules that generally hold true in everyday life, but we must be careful not to carve these generalizations in stone. Proverbs 10:3–4 is a case in point. While it is generally true in God's good creation that work brings material rewards, do you agree that the righteous are always fed and the hardworking always get their due? What would you say to the Wisdom teacher on this point?

Proverbs 13:23 admits the possibility that diligent work is not always rewarded. Eugene Peterson paraphrases the verse like this: "Banks foreclose on the farms of the poor, or else the poor lose their shirts to crooked lawyers."¹

What forces do you see at work in our world which prevent the poor from profiting from their labor?

How would you sum up the teaching of Proverbs on the subject of work?

Concluding the Session

Ask the men to think of one instance in their own lives in which diligence or hard work paid worthwhile dividends. Allow anyone to share aloud who wishes to do so.

You may close with this prayer.

Great Creator, you are still working to care for your world, and you have invited us to work at your side. As we have been blessed by the efforts of others, so let our work be a source of help and sustenance for others, in the name of Jesus the carpenter. Amen.

1. Eugene Peterson, *The Message: Proverbs* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995), p. 46.

Afterword

The worldview of wisdom is seen in the all-encompassing mandate of work. No fit person, whatever his or her station or class, was exempt from it. Our creatureliness as vice-regents of God in charge of the environment with which He gifted us, our membership in an interdependent society from whose beneficence we draw and to whose obligations we contribute, our very physical natures that require exercise for mobility and food for sustenance, and our urges to subdue, innovate, build, sustain, and refine—all of these make work essential to our personal welfare and the achievement of the purposes of our existence.²

A farmer, being at death's door, and desiring to impart to his sons a secret of much moment, called them round him and said, "My sons, I am shortly about to die. I would have you know, therefore, that in my vineyard there lies a hidden treasure. Dig, and you will find it." As soon as their father was dead, the sons took spade and fork and turned up the soil of the vineyard over and over again, in their search for the treasure which they supposed to lie buried there. They found none, however: but the vines, after so thorough a digging, produced a crop such as had never before been seen.

There is no treasure without toil.³

Mr. Meant-To has a comrade,
And his name is Didn't-Do;
Have you ever chanced to meet them?
Did they ever call on you?

These two fellows live together
In the house of Never-Win,
And I'm told that it is haunted
By the ghost of Might-Have-Been.⁴

Looking Ahead

What role does attitude play in the wise life? What is the rightful place of money in our priorities? Is it possible to want too much success? What kind of living leads to true happiness? In preparation for the next meeting you may wish to read Prov. 11:4, 11:28, 14:30, 15:13, 15:15–17, 16:3, 16:8, 16:9, 17:22, 19:1, 20:24, 22:1, 23:4–5, 25:16, 27:1, and 30:7–9.

2. David A. Hubbard, *The Communicator's Commentary: Proverbs* (Dallas: Word, Inc., 1989), p. 160.

3. Aesop, as quoted in William J. Bennett, *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 370.

4. William J. Bennett, *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 364.

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Prov. 11:4; 11:28; 14:30; 15:13;
15:15–17; 16:3; 16:8; 16:9; 17:22; 19:1;
20:24; 22:1; 23:4–5; 25:16; 27:1; 30:7–9

The Wise Man and CONTENTMENT



* INTRODUCTION

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Dad and I are sitting in a cabin on Trooper Island in Dale Hollow Lake. The September morning is drizzly, and the strong coffee tastes good. Dad is in a storytelling mood.

“Pop never had much ambition,” Dad says, shaking his head. “He knew wood like nobody I’ve ever seen. I remember the Wood and Mosaic wanted him to grade lumber, but he turned down the promotion. Didn’t want the responsibility.

“So Pop stayed on the saw. He was one of the best saw men on the job. The saws were huge, taller than me. One Saturday, Pop was working the saw with his friend Milt. They would have had both saws going, but nobody showed up to off-bear the cut lumber, so Pop and Milt took turns, one sawing and the other off-bearing.

“Milt was a first-class saw man, too. He’d been at it for years. But sometimes the saws would hang up, and they’d kick the wood back out. There wasn’t much you could do about it, except to be careful. Pop was off-bearing and Milt was on the saw when the big blade hung up. The log kicked out and caught Milt right in the face. He was probably dead before he knew what hit him.

“Pop looked at what was left of his friend, and he shut the saw down. He called the boss in to take care of Milt’s body, and Pop went home. That was a Saturday. On Monday, Pop went in to work and told them he wouldn’t saw anymore. They told him that if he didn’t saw, then he didn’t work there anymore. So Pop left and never went back. To him it was just a job, and it wasn’t worth risking his life.”

Dad gets up to refill his coffee mug.

“As long as we had food on the table and wood for the stove, Pop didn’t care about much else,” Dad says. “Pop wasn’t afraid of work. He just didn’t care about getting ahead. Maybe he didn’t *need* to get ahead. He enjoyed the sunrise. He loved to be out in the woods. He knew every tree and every bird. He always had time to hunt. I guess he had all he wanted.

“I remember the last time we went hunting together. It was eight days before Pop died. I don’t think we got a single rabbit, but I wouldn’t take anything in the world for that day. We sat down to eat peanut butter and syrup sandwiches and drink coffee, and we got to talking.

“I said, ‘Pop, I’d be scared to death to be where you are in life. You’re fifty-five years old, and you don’t have a thing to show for it. No security. No future. I’m not going to let that happen to me.’

“He didn’t get mad. He just smiled and said, ‘You’d better hurry, son.’”

Dad peers into the steam rising from his cup. He’s quiet for a few minutes. Then he sips the black coffee, and he says, “Pop was a smart man.”

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite volunteers to read aloud Prov. 14:30, 15:13, 15:15–17, and 17:22. In the light of these verses, ask the group to name the benefits of a contented heart or a cheerful disposition. They may also add ideas to the list that emerge from personal experience and insight. If a flip chart or newsprint is available you can list all these benefits on a sheet headed by a smiling heart.

Then ask volunteers to read aloud 11:4, 15:16, 16:8, 19:1, 22:1 and 23:4–5. Ask the group to name the disappointments of wealth or the important things that money cannot buy. Build a list both from Proverbs and from the thinking of the group. You may print the ideas on newsprint headed by a dollar sign. Leave it posted throughout the meeting.

In a sales motivation video, a convention speaker says to the crowd, “They tell you money won’t make you happy. They’re wrong! I’m here to tell you that money has made me very happy!” What do you think?

When you review the happiest times in your life, do you find a common thread? Is money involved?

Do you really believe that outlook and temperament can affect physical health? Why? Can you give examples?

You probably take pretty good care of your physical health. What do you do to take care of your mental/emotional health?

On the whole, Proverbs has a positive view of wealth as the natural consequence of a wise and industrious lifestyle. But problems arise when wealth is the goal of life, rather than a secondary benefit. How would you summarize the message of Prov. 23:4-5?

In regard to chasing the dollar, the sage says, “Be wise enough to desist” (Prov. 23:4). Do you ever have trouble knowing when to stop working? Why does this happen?

Proverbs 15:16, 16:8, 19:1, and 22:1 name things that are more precious than wealth. Has the quest for more money or a higher style of living ever threatened something precious in your life? If so, explain.

Enough Is Enough

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

A few years ago while I was lifting weights on a regular basis, my wife walked in on my workout and asked in an offhand manner, “When will you have enough weight on the bar? When will you be able to stop adding plates?”

The question made no sense to me at the time. But on reflection, I see that one of my most basic assumptions is, “More is better.” Whether it’s a bench press or earning money or collecting educational degrees or planting a garden or enjoying a buffet, I operate as if more is always better.

But it’s not.

The idea certainly runs counter to the popular thinking in our culture, but sometimes wisdom consists in acknowledging that enough is enough. The insatiable quest for “more/bigger/better” too often results in obsession, workaholism, envy, broken marriages, neglected children, dysfunctional families, postponed religion, depression, and ruined health. Maybe it’s time we took a long look at what makes us truly happy and what doesn’t.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite the group to read Prov. 11:28, 16:3, 16:9, 20:24, 25:16, 27:1, and 30:7-9. These proverbs were originally crafted for oral repetition. You might recover the “spoken-ness” of the proverbs by having individuals read them aloud and asking the group repeat them line by line.

Anyone who has ever eaten or drunk to excess can empathize with Prov. 25:16. Can you think of instances when you have gotten too much of a good thing?

One danger of wealth is the temptation to put our trust in the almighty dollar instead of the Almighty God. Can you think of guidelines for using money faithfully without idolizing it?

It was a wise thinker, indeed, who first spoke the words of Prov. 30:7-9. We don’t want to idolize wealth, but neither should we idealize poverty. Where do you find yourself on the continuum from Too-Little to Too-Much? How can you tell when you have enough?

Proverbs such as 16:3 and 27:1 remind us that our true security is in God’s hands, not ours. In what areas of your life have you shown healthy trust in God? In what areas would you like to trust God more?

Concluding the Session

Return to the list of blessings that attend a cheerful heart. Ask the group to generate concrete ideas about how a person can cultivate a happy attitude. Be as specific as possible. Add the ideas to the list. Invite each person to try out at least one idea in the week ahead.

You may close with this responsive prayer.

One: God of grace, in your goodness you give us everything we need. For the days to come we pray for joy and delight in the pleasures of life.

All: Give us enough joy, Lord.

One: We pray for food, shelter, and resources to meet our needs.

All: Give us enough money, Lord.

One: We pray for time to spend with the people we love and opportunities for the things we enjoy.

All: Give us enough time, Lord.

One: We pray for discerning minds to sort out the worthwhile from the worthless.

All: Give us enough wisdom, Lord, in the name of Jesus our Savior. Amen.

Afterword

My dears, I draw the picture of the wealthy couple standing in a darkened hallway, peering into a lighted room where black servants were lifting their voices in merriment and comradery, and I realize that living well is an art which can be developed. Of course, you will need the basic talents to build upon: They are a love of life and ability to take great pleasure from small offerings, an assurance that the world owes you nothing and that every gift is exactly that, a gift. That people who may differ from you in political stance, sexual persuasion, and racial inheritance can be founts of fun, and if you are lucky, they can become even convivial comrades. . . .

Life seems to love the liver of it. Money and power can liberate only if they are used to do so. They can imprison and inhibit more finally than barred windows and iron chains.¹

The monastic response to money is seen in the ancient vow of *poverty* . . . We need to hear their word today: we who love greed more than we love the gospel, we who live in fear, and not in trust. We need to hear their word today: we who define people in terms of their net worth, we who push and shove to gain an ever larger piece of the consumer pie. . . .

The Puritan response to the issue of money is seen in their stress upon *industry* . . . We need to hear their word today: we who find work meaningless and dull, we who are tempted by sloth and laziness. We need to hear their word today: we who are workaholics, we who take multiple jobs in order to move up the economic ladder.

We can be glad for the monastic vow of poverty and the Puritan “vow” of industry, but we today need a new “vow” that responds creatively and boldly to the money issue. It must be a vow that will reject the modern mania for wealth without a morbid asceticism. It must be a vow that calls us to use money without serving money. It must be a vow that brings money into obedience to the will and ways of God.²

Looking Ahead

Why do we say and do things that we later regret? How does discipline lead to freedom? Why is self-control important in a life of wisdom? The next discussion will look at alcohol, anger, and habits that diminish our choices. You may wish to read Prov. 14:17, 15:18, 16:32, 19:11, 20:1, 23:19–21, 23:29–35, 25:28, and 30:32–33.

1. Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), pp. 65–66.

2. Richard Foster, *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1985), pp. 5–7.

session *six*

Prov. 14:17; 15:18; 16:32; 19:11; 20:1;
23:19-21; 23:29-35; 25:28; 30:32-33

The Wise Man and SELF-DISCIPLINE



* INTRODUCTION

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

I feel in my left pocket the weight of a folding knife. The knife is a little larger than I like. It doesn't ride well in dress slacks, but I often carry it anyway because the knife reminds me of family members long gone.

The tip of the gray iron blade protrudes slightly when the knife is closed. This is by design. With practice I have learned to hook the knife point on a pocket or a seam in my jeans and open the blade with one hand. Sometimes I imagine the knife in other hands, slicing through baling twine or gutting a fish.

The handle is bone, aged to a deep brown by half a century of sweat and skin oil. The initials "WB" are scratched in the bone. My Uncle Woody got the knife during World War II while he was in Africa and Italy. He later gave the knife to my grandfather, from which it passed to my father, and then to me.

Uncle Woody was a meat cutter. I'm told he was a good cook and a graceful dancer. He had a large family: three sons and three daughters. My personal memories are vague, but I remember Uncle Woody as a gentle, smiling man, who always smelled of alcohol. He was ten years older than my father, and my father loved him dearly.

Uncle Woody had been drinking seriously since he was nineteen. Nobody doubted that it was the alcohol that finally killed him. And nobody understood why he drank himself to death. He probably didn't understand it himself, God rest his soul. He died at the age of forty-three. Five months later his youngest daughter was born.

I have Uncle Woody's knife.

I have a few memories.

And I have inherited a nugget of wisdom about choices, consequences, and self-discipline.

Some lessons cost too much.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

If the group is using a common translation of the Bible, invite the group to read aloud in unison Prov. 20:1 and 23:19-21, and to read 23:29-35 responsively. If not, the men may read the passages silently.

Some passages of the Bible extol wine as a blessing from the hand of God (such as Ps. 104:14-15), but in a book as practical as Proverbs we are not surprised to hear the warning signal sounded stridently and insistently. Proverbs 23:19-21 warns of the costliness of drinking too much. What do you consider to be the heaviest costs of alcohol abuse?

Proverbs 23:29-35 is one of the most vividly descriptive passages in the book. It's hard to believe the writer isn't recounting a personal experience! In your opinion, why is alcohol compared to a serpent?

The most chilling words in this description of drunkenness come at the end. "When shall I awake? I will seek another drink" (23:35). This is a frightening depiction of self-destructive addictive behavior. How has your life or the life of someone you know been affected by alcohol or drug addiction?

What counsel would you give to a young person who asked you about the wisdom of drinking? Would your habits match your words?

Where do you draw the line between moderate drinking and alcohol abuse?

Alcohol is merely one potential danger within the larger Wisdom teaching about self-control. There are many other areas in which a person may show a lack of self-discipline. Match each verse below with the temptation to lose healthy control.

- | | |
|-------|----------------------|
| 23:20 | Revenge |
| 21:17 | Excessive spending |
| 21:20 | Greed |
| 20:22 | Rash speech |
| 28:25 | Overeating |
| 15:2 | Luxury and pampering |

What else would you add to the list?

Proverbs 25:28 epitomizes the Wisdom teaching on self-control. This verse is stated negatively. How would you rephrase the proverb in a positive sense?

The Man Who Rules Himself

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Anger is the diametric opposite of self-control. When we are angry we are more likely to do things and say things that will cause trouble for ourselves and for others. In the Hebrew idiom, the man who is prone to anger is called “the heated man” (rendered as “hot-tempered” in Prov. 15:18). This Hebrew word for *heat* can also describe a snake’s venom (Ps. 58:4) and the effects of strong drink (Hos. 7:5). Anger is both toxic and intoxicating in its effects!

Self-discipline is always a problem for the heated man. He is constantly on the verge of melting or exploding or bursting into flame, much to the detriment of himself and anyone nearby.

While there are probably times for righteous indignation, the Bible takes a consistently dim view of human anger. Jesus goes so far as to link anger and murder as fruits from the same poisonous tree (Matt. 5:21–22). Wisdom consists of making sensible choices, but anger blurs those choices and leads us into paths that we would normally shun.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

A few verses from Proverbs will serve to give an overview of the teaching on anger. Have volunteers read aloud these individual passages: 14:17, 15:18, 16:32, 19:11, and 30:32–33. If there are several translations in the group, you may wish to compare different versions of each passage.

Putting your hand over your mouth may be a reliable antidote to mounting anger (30:32–33). Can you recall a situation when hot words started or aggravated a fight?

The graciousness and forbearance to “overlook an offense” (19:11) can help to defuse a potentially angry confrontation. In what situations do you find it hardest to make allowances for offensive behavior from others?

Proverbs 16:32 once again sounds the theme of self-control. Better to master one’s self than to rule a whole city. In what ways have you grown in self-discipline over the years?

In what areas of your life would you like to work for greater self-control?

Concluding the Session

Allow time for the men to think about an area of life in which they may be behaving addictively or some aspect of their personality that is getting out of control. Those who wish may share their thoughts.

In preparation for the closing prayer, invite each man to cup his hands and hold them at eye level as a symbolic way of offering to God the parts of their lives that need greater self-control.

You may begin your prayer with a time of silence, and then close in this way:

God of all strength, you sent Christ to set us free from every kind of bondage. Lift from us every compulsion, every unhealthy habit, every addiction that prevents us from living life abundantly. Your liberating Spirit within us is greater than any spirit of slavery! Grant us the grace to serve you in every area of life, in the name of Christ Jesus. Amen.

Afterword

“People who fly into a rage always make a bad landing.”¹

Given his perspective on life, my great-great-Uncle Pirtle might have stepped into the world straight from the pages of Proverbs. When I was about ten years old he presented my brother and me with membership cards for a club in which he had enrolled us. The card made me a member of the “No Smoke, No Drink Club.” Along with the membership cards, he also gave a sheet of paper with estimated figures of how much money we would save (along with interest) by not wasting our money on cigarettes and beer. He assured us the savings would easily pay for a college education!

Looking Ahead

How do you react to the phrase “the fear of the Lord”? Does it have an old-fashioned ring? Does it fit comfortably with your Christian understanding of God? In practical terms, how do we live in the fear of the Lord? In preparation for next week, you may wish to read Prov. 1:7, 1:29–31, 3:3–12, 8:13, 14:26–27, 16:6, and 23:17.

1. Will Rogers, as quoted in Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations* (Rockville, MD: Assurance Publishers, 1984), p. 132.

session

seven

Prov. 1:7; 1:29–31;

3:3–12; 8:13;

14:26–27; 16:6; 23:17

The Wise Man and

THE FEAR OF THE LORD



* INTRODUCTION

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

We come full circle now in our study of Proverbs and return to the place where we began, the place where all wisdom begins, with the fear of the Lord. I have been richly blessed with wise men through my years, but I learned the fear of the Lord from a wise woman. My father has never been one to talk much about his faith. It was from my mother that I learned to love and revere God.

I am remembering a typical day in my childhood. Mom is bustling around the house, cleaning, straightening, running the sweeper. She sings while she works. Mom has a pleasant voice, a little bit country. I am watching television, but the words of the song sneak into my head and lodge somewhere near my heart.

“When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we’d first begun.”

I know about heaven; that’s where God and Jesus live. Someday I’ll be in heaven, too, because God loves me and has made a special place just for me.

“Come, help me shake the rugs,” Mom says.

I follow her out the door into a spring morning. I like shaking the rugs. I enjoy the snap of the rug when I flip it just right, and I love to watch the dust swirling in the sunlight. Mom has convinced me that I am the best rug shaker in the world, and I take considerable pride in my work. To hear her tell it, I am also a prodigy at drying dishes.

“Hasn’t God made a wonderful day!” she says. “Just look at those flowers. God must love beautiful things.”

In years to come, I will question why God allows so much evil to run rampant in the world, but I am nevertheless persuaded for life by my mother’s conviction that God’s world is fundamentally good and beautiful.

The day passes uneventfully, punctuated by reliable rituals like lunch and dinner. There is even some shared playtime. I am the Lone Ranger, and Mom makes a pretty good Tonto.

At bedtime, Mom tucks me in and listens while I say my prayers, a recitation of “Now I lay me down to sleep,” followed by a litany of God-blesses.

Tomorrow is Sunday, and my church clothes are already laid out, as is a nickel for the offering. Tomorrow, when the plate comes by, I will drop in my coin, and Mom will drop in an envelope. She has taught me about tithing, and the habit persists to this day.

Church and Sunday school are all right. I don’t like them or dislike them, although I suspect that the networks purposely schedule the best shows of the week during church time. But there is no debate on the matter of church attendance. Once in a while we sleep in, but those are the exceptions. Worship is simply what we do on Sundays.

Mom kisses me, turns off the light, and leaves the room. I close my eyes and take comfort from the patchwork quilt that covers me, a living quilt pieced together from hymn refrains, creation theology, hugs, prayers, nickels, stories of Jesus, and patient answers to endless questions about God and the world.

This is the fabric of my young life. This is the unsung work of a wise woman who is stitching the fear of the Lord into my little-boy heart. This is where wisdom begins for me.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite the group to read the first half of Prov. 1:7. This phrase serves as a motto for the entire book, and the “fear of the Lord” is a recurring refrain throughout Proverbs.

Read this motto aloud from as many translations as you have available, and compare the different nuances. Here are a few versions to get you started.

“To have knowledge, you must first have reverence for the Lord.”¹

“Respect and obey the Lord! This is the beginning of knowledge.”²

1. From the *Good News Bible: The Bible in Today’s English Version*. Old Testament: © American Bible Society, 1976; New Testament: © American Bible Society, 1966, 1971, 1976. Used by permission.

2. *Contemporary English Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1995).

“The first principle of knowledge is to hold the Lord in awe.”³

“Start with God—the first step in learning is bowing down to God.”⁴

When you think of fear what normally comes to your mind? Does this word make sense to you in the phrase “fear of the Lord”? If not, what word might make more sense to you?

Some commentators suggest that “fear of the Lord” carries different connotations in different contexts. Sinners are in terror of God because they fear punishment. The righteous are in awe of God because they revere God’s power and goodness. Do you think this idea fits with the teaching of Proverbs? Why or why not?

When the sage says that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7) what is the significance of the word beginning? Is this a starting point that we leave behind as we grow more mature? Explain your thinking.

The fear of the Lord is marked by an inward attitude. According to Prov. 8:13, 14:26–27, and 23:17, what comprises this inward fear of the Lord?

The fear of the Lord is also an outward form of obedience. According to Prov. 1:29–31, 3:7, and 16:6, what are some aspects of the outward fear of the Lord?

If you were trying to explain your faith to someone with no knowledge of Christianity, to what would you point in your lifestyle as evidence that you are a person with a healthy fear of the Lord?

A Primer on Reverence

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

The fear of the Lord is not an ephemeral emotion; it is a continuing spiritual path, a way of life. As the sages of Israel conceived it, the fear of the Lord is not just a belief system or a code of conduct; it is both and more. Wisdom does not begin with right thinking or right living; wisdom begins with a right relationship. True wisdom is a way of living in communion with God in all circumstances. Wisdom is a loving reverence and obedience to God which permeates the wholeness of life.

For Christians this life-filling reverence grows out of the sinless life, atoning death, and triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ—the living, incarnate Wisdom of God. Proverbs cannot quite carry us into the gospel, but Israel’s wisdom can give us practical guidance for living our faith in the everyday world. As a handbook for the daily walk of faith, Proverbs has no equal.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Have the group read Prov. 3:3–12, working around the group with each person reading aloud a verse in turn.

This passage partially explains what it means to live in the fear of the Lord. For each verse listed below give your interpretation of the teaching of the verse, and then a specific example of how that teaching might be put into practice in your own life.

FEARING THE LORD
MEANS:

I CAN PUT THIS INTO
PRACTICE BY:

3:3	_____	_____
3:5	_____	_____
3:6	_____	_____
3:7	_____	_____
3:9	_____	_____
3:11	_____	_____

3. R.B.Y. Scott, *The Anchor Bible: Proverbs—Ecclesiastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 70.

4. Eugene Peterson, *The Message: Proverbs* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995), p. 9.

As a Christian reader of the Old Testament, what does it mean to you “to trust in the Lord with all your heart”?

Proverbs 3:9–12 urges us to love God faithfully in both good times (such as the harvest) and in times of trial (the difficult times that strengthen or discipline us). Are you more likely to remember God in the good times or in the bad times? Why?

Do you believe that suffering and hardship can be a means of growing? Have you ever experienced God’s love in a particularly vivid way during a time of suffering?

The last word in this passage is an assurance of God’s abiding love for us. Do you think the love of God is an important idea in Proverbs? Why or why not?

Concluding the Session

Allow a few minutes for the members of the group to reflect on their journey through Proverbs. Perhaps you will want to separate the men into small groups of three or four to talk about their experience. What have they learned that was new? What old ideas have been affirmed or challenged? Is there a favorite proverb that will be carried away from the study? Have eyes been opened to the divine wisdom that can sometimes be discovered in other people?

After a few minutes of discussion, you may close with this prayer.

Christ our Lord, Wisdom of God, we stand in awe of your love. We revere you for the salvation you make available to us. We tremble in the presence of your power and glory. Help us to be teachable disciples, trusting you with our whole hearts, following you with loyalty and faithfulness, honoring you with all that we have, and rejoicing in your love even when life is hard. Amen.

Afterword

Give us, O Lord, steadfast hearts, which no unworthy thought can drag downwards; unconquered hearts, which no tribulation can wear out; upright hearts, which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside.

Bestow upon us also, O Lord God, understanding to know you, diligence to seek you, wisdom to find you, and a faithfulness that may finally embrace you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.⁵

Wisdom is not a question of what you know; wisdom is a matter of Who you know.⁶

Lord of all wisdom, I give you my mind;
enrich it with truths that express your design.
What eye has not seen and what ear has not
heard is taught by your Spirit and shines from
your Word.

Lord of all bounty, I give you my heart;
I praise and adore you for all you impart:
your love to inspire me, your counsel to lead,
your presence to shield me, whatever my need.

Lord of all being, I give you my all,
for if I disown you, I stumble and fall;
but sworn in glad service your word to obey,
I walk in your freedom the rest of the way.⁷

5. Thomas à Kempis, as quoted in *The Worshipping Church* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1991), no. 528.

6. From an unpublished sermon by Dr. Leo Walker. Used with permission.

7. John C. Winslow, from *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1987), no. 286.

THE WRITER

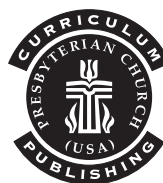
The Rev. Michael Brewer, pastor of the Crescent Springs Presbyterian Church, has been the recipient of far more wisdom over the years than he has been able to absorb. For what little he has learned along the way, he is indebted to many wise people, beginning with his parents, Harvey and Gale Brewer. The fruit doesn't fall far from the tree!

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