

October 15, 2023
Nuggets and Pearls
“Learning for Life”
Proverbs 19:20

Intro:

Wisdom sayings, or proverbs, are found all around us. They are not unique or particularly proprietary to any one culture or generation. Sure, a particular concept or lesson might be expressed in a slightly different way from one country of origin to another, but at the heart of the phrase will be a similar, almost universal lesson.

Proverbs come in different shapes and sizes. Some are short and almost too directly to the point. Some take on the form of a fable guided by a moral principle. Or they may even extend to the length and level of a parable or short story intended to teach a particular lesson. Regardless of the length, what is said is not the last word on a particular topic, and often relies on the listener or reader to have the wit and wisdom to make the necessary connections.

Proverbs in our present day can also be delivered, or received, from a comical perspective where humor is used to drive the often more subtle and deeper point home. Some of you might recall the comic strip “B.C.” In that comic, the characters would sometimes take a journey to consult with the wise old master that resided at the top of a mountain. Or, for those of you whose memory doesn’t go back that far, a similar strategy is employed in the comic strip “Pearls Before Swine”, which I have mentioned as a particular favorite of mine. Whenever Pig or Rat, or one of the other characters need to gain a nugget of wisdom, they climb to the top of the hill and consult the... well, let’s call him a smart alec, on the hill. Apparently to be truly wise, one must reside on the top of mountains...

It is possible that many of us live by, or are at least familiar with, many proverbs without even knowing it. They have been drilled into the fabric of our behaviour by constantly being repeated by parents or others who had a role in teaching us.

“You can lead a horse to water..... but you can’t make it drink.”

“A Bird in the hand....is worth two in the bush.”

“Beggars can’t... be choosers.”

“A Penny saved... is a penny earned.”

“The early bird... gets the worm.”

“If at first you don’t succeed.... skydiving’s not for you.” (“Try, try again” is the actual phrase.)

Over the next several weeks, until we get into the Advent season, we are going to look at some of the sayings and instructions that are found in the Biblical book of Proverbs. We aren’t going to cover all of them, and we aren’t going to follow a particular order or progression. We are just going to pull a few out of the many that are there and see what we can learn as we seek to grow in wisdom and knowledge.

Now, the book of Proverbs was largely written by, or composed from sayings by, King Solomon. Biblically, he was touted as the wisest person to have ever lived. Certainly, his fame, wealth, and relatively peaceful reign over the Israelites would attest to some supernatural intelligence and knowledge about the world and how it should and does work. If you were to do even a cursory study of his life, you would find that Solomon was not perfect in his wisdom and did many things that you or I today would look at and question right away. But he was gifted with an insight not usual to most people and so it is fitting that a book in the Bible focusing on life advice would mostly contain his sayings. Others contributed to the Proverbs as well – the generally identified “sayings of the wise” in Proverbs 22:17-24:34, the sayings of Augur in chapter 30, and that of King Lemuel (or more accurately his mother) in chapter 31.

What this tells us is that even though Solomon was the primary contributor, he did not corner the market on wise advice. It also tells us that the concept of this kind of teaching and wisdom was not unique to the Israelite community. Proverb-like sayings existed in all the national cultures in the known world of Solomon’s

day. Most of them were far older than the ones we have received from Solomon, and there is strong scholarship to suggest that much of what has been recorded in the book of Proverbs was heavily influenced by similar writings and traditions from Egypt and other ancient near-Eastern cultures.

So, what is it about the Biblical Book of Proverbs that warrants its placement in the Biblical Canon?

I believe the answer to this is that most *secular* proverbs exist to place the individual person at the center of the learning. I as an individual will be advanced by listening to the advice. *Biblical* proverbs, on the other hand, place God at the center of the lesson. Yes, they are useful for an individual's growth, but that growth is in the form of a greater understanding of who God is and a deeper relationship with Him. Proverbs read quite differently if God, not humanity, is the ultimate subject.

The Text:

With this in mind, I thought we would start by looking at Proverbs 19:20. This verse appears rather straight forward, and you might wonder how it can be expanded upon to make up a sermon. But if we look closely, there is something here to help us grow in our understanding of who God is and our relationship to him.

“Get all the advice and instruction you can, so you will be wise the rest of your life.”

So, be a lifelong student. Easy.

But maybe not so much. Keep in mind that proverbs teach us about God and draw us into a deeper understanding of Him and how we should then live.

There are two parts to this proverb. The first is that we should get all the advice and instruction we can. This is the easy part. Of course we should get all the

advice and instruction we can. We would be fools to think that we could ever know everything about anything.

There are many ways we can learn. We can read different genres of writing. We can research different topics through credible websites. We can learn to do things with our hands, such as a new crafting skill, a new skill in home repair, or how to operate our computer or smartphone. In the context of church, we can attend a Bible study or small group; choose and stick to a Bible reading plan (maybe choosing to read different translations); read a commentary or do a biblical study of our own; or take on the task of teaching in a children's ministry. Certainly, prayer should be a part of any of those efforts.

So what is difficult about this verse?

The difficulty comes in the second part of the proverb: "so you will be wise the rest of your life." This doesn't look like a problem until you realize that it assumes you have in fact learned it all, and not just learned it all, but learned it all at a young enough age to actually qualify you to be counted as "wise for the rest of your life". It is here that the arrogance of self can take the place of God as the center of your life. It can be all too easy to believe that you know everything, and in knowing everything, that everyone else must then defer to you.

But God is to be central, not us. And in the very next verse, the teacher brings us back down to the reality of who is in control between us and God. Proverbs 19:21 states "You can make many plans, but the Lord's purpose will prevail." God's plan wins, not yours or mine. Ultimately, it doesn't matter how much we think we know, or how careful and diligent we are in our planning. God will order and arrange things as He sees fit. Our role, then is not to try to out-plan God, but to get to know Him better so that we can realign ourselves to His plan. This is, of course the stated purpose of the book of Proverbs 1:1-7.

Fear of the Lord:

Chapter 9 also tells us the purpose of the book. It repeats part of what chapter 1 says and encourages life-long learning about God. Verses 8-9 instruct us to teach the wise – meaning that it is the wise who recognize that they still have much to learn, and this insight helps us keep the proper perspective when it comes to our relationship with God. Verses 10-11 then give the reason this is so important: if our learning is directed toward a better understanding of God and our relationship to Him, then we are building the foundation that our wisdom can rest upon. Keeping God as the object and subject of our learning will result in good judgement. Good judgement results in a longer and healthier life, and will overall be beneficial to us.

Getting back to Proverbs 19:20, we see now that it is not saying that we will be able to read a book or somehow just “know everything” at some point in our lives and then sit back and enjoy being wise for the rest of our lives. No, wisdom is in the continual learning about and seeking after God for our whole lives. As we grow in this wisdom, then we also grow in good judgement, in making good decisions, in being able to discern what God’s plans are and how we are to fit into those plans. Rather than working against Him, we are working with Him.

Conclusion:

As we spend these next few weeks looking at various proverbs, do pay attention to the practical lessons that they offer – and they will offer those. These practical lessons are for our benefit, and do help us. But also, pay attention to what those practical lessons reveal about God – who He is and what He is up to, in your life and in the lives of those around you.

Finally, if there are any passages in the book of Proverbs that you find particularly compelling or challenging, let me know and I can try to work them into the sermon series.

Let’s pray.