

Suggestions for Studying the Proverbs and Gaining Wisdom

WHAT DOES IT TEACH?

Normally, determining what a proverb teaches will not be difficult to determine. Occasionally, our culture or situation may be so different, that we have difficulty understanding (or even translating) a proverb. In such cases, we might not be able to fully answer these questions, *but such problems won't affect most of the proverbs.*

For each proverb, ask...

1. What does it say?

If we simply pay attention to the words and how they connect to each other, we will normally have no problem in finding out what the proverb says. Often, the two (or occasionally more) lines will parallel each other, either saying something similar in different ways, or forming a contrast. The second line may also build (or expand) on a concept that is introduced in the first line.

2. Why is it true? How is it supported by other verses in the Bible?

Most proverbs tell us how to live, and we need to let what they say influence our conduct and perspective on life. Yet there are some proverbs that simply explain the ways of the *world* - why sinful people do certain things, or why injustice sometimes exists. They help us understand much of what happens around us, but *they do not command us to follow the world's example!*

3. Are there any "exceptions" to the proverb (situations in which it would not be applicable)? How is this supported by other verses in the Bible?

Some proverbs will present one side of an issue; other proverbs will present the corresponding "opposite" side. Example: Proverbs 26:4-5. Both are true, but they complement each other, or form "boundaries" that show us our range of potential options.

APPLYING WHAT IT TEACHES

The *primary* emphasis of the proverbs (though not the *only* emphasis) is to teach us how a God-fearing lifestyle affects us in this present life. Godliness affects not only *eternity*, but *now* - 1 Timothy 4:8! It may also teach us about how the opposite lifestyle - a morally foolish one - affects us.

Because of this, we need to ask ourselves how we can apply the proverbs to our lives. Even proverbs which describe "life in a sinful world" should influence us - by showing us what *not* to be like, or by helping us to not be too surprised, when we see such conduct in the world around us.

1. Perhaps the first question we could ask ourselves would be this:

How can this proverb affect my lifestyle... at home? at work or school? elsewhere?

2. Since we are sometimes *reluctant* to face our need to change, perhaps we can also ask the following question. (If we *do* change, we will be glad we did!)

Is there any part in my life, in which I have a vague idea that this proverb should affect my lifestyle, though I don't really want it to? If so, what is it? How can I change this situation? (It probably won't change overnight, but it can begin.)

3. We can also ask ourselves questions about the proverb that are specific to the proverb itself, and then try to find the answer. For instance, if we have just read about a specific contrast between a wise person and a morally foolish one, we could ask ourselves which of the characteristics described in the verse are present in our lives, and (if necessary) how we can begin to modify our actions and attitudes.

REMEMBER THE STARTING POINT FOR WISDOM

In the Bible, the concept of "wisdom," does not refer to just "intellectual abilities," but includes moral, God-fearing dimensions. Without these additional dimensions, there might be some practical benefit from taking heed to the proverbs, but you will not be capable of having *true* wisdom in all its fullness.

Consider the following verses: Job 28:28 (the whole chapter focuses on this issue); Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10. Each of these verses mentions the connection between the "fear of the LORD" and wisdom, understanding or knowledge. You could also include Proverbs 8:13; 19:23; and many other verses, which do not necessarily have these words, but which show the relationship between the "fear of the LORD" and one's conduct.

Admittedly, the idea of "wisdom" having moral and God-fearing dimensions may seem strange to the modern mind. But we must remember this: It was *people*, not God, who distorted the concept of wisdom.