

Life with the Grain of the Universe: Proverbs

About these studies

Life with the Grain of the Universe is a series of nine ready-to-go studies on the book of Proverbs. It is designed for Bible study groups, but could equally be used for individual study and reflection. Proverbs is often a difficult book to approach. For the most part, it consists of individual sayings, often with no connection from one to the next. This can leave individual Christians, and Bible study leaders, somewhat stuck as to how to proceed. The aim of this series is to make things easier, and to draw out some of the teaching of Proverbs, which has great value for the life of Christ's disciples in this age.

Briefly, the structure of Proverbs is as follows:

- 1:1-9:18 — Introduction to wisdom and foolishness, often with long connected sections in verse.
- 10:1-22:16 — The Proverbs of Solomon. Mostly individual sayings, not especially connected to one another.
- 22:17-31:31 — Further collections of wisdom. These are often in more connected chunks.
 - i. 22:17-24:34 – The words of the wise
 - ii. 25:1-29:27 – further saying of Solomon collected by Hezekiah's officials
 - iii. 30:1-33 – The oracle of Agur
 - iv. 31:1-31 – The oracle of king Lemuel's mother.

These studies, however, are organised not chronologically, but by theme. This is because of the conviction that this is a productive way to read the book of Proverbs. Organisation by theme means that there is a lot of flipping around. However, this thematic approach repays the effort, as Proverbs really is particularly concerned with a number of themes and when its wisdom is heard together the message can be very powerful. Some proverbs, of course, deal with more than one theme, and so there will be some overlap between studies. But in general, the themes are distinct, and I suspect that anyone who reads Proverbs through and attempts to group ideas will come up with at least a similar arrangement. By the end of these studies, almost all of Proverbs will have been read; and for the leader, the Appendix below lists the entire book of Proverbs arranged by the themes that drive the studies.

The most difficult issue for the Christian reader of Proverbs is how this book fits into the whole story of the Bible. The genesis of Proverbs was a particular time in Israel's history (the success of the monarchy under Solomon), and its wisdom bears the marks of that experience. Its overall message can be summarized simply: righteousness works. Proverbs is concerned with wisdom, that is, with how to live sensibly in this world, how to live in a way that works ("with the grain of the universe"); and its answer is that what's wise is actually to be righteous. So the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (see Study 2). The obvious question that arises when faced with this teaching is: what about when righteousness doesn't work? What about when the righteous perish along with the wicked? (Which, of course, is the challenge of Ecclesiastes.) This big issue is dealt with in Study 3 (see notes). It is ultimately resolved only in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the promise of the vindication of righteousness in the coming of the Kingdom of God.

In leading these studies, there are a few things to bear in mind. (1) These studies will be most helpful and interesting if people really get into the proverbs, take them to heart, and enjoy them. For this reason, it is important to take time over the frequent suggested question: "which of these proverbs do you find interesting, or helpful?" It may also be good to encourage people to mark proverbs that strike them as they go along, or to have a "proverb of the week" for each week that they write down and remember. This can be very fruitful. On this note, a couple of further questions it is very useful to have up your sleeve are: (i) Are there any proverbs that especially appeal to you? Why? What do you like about them? (ii) Are there any proverbs you don't understand or are uncomfortable with? Why? Taking time to explore and enjoy the individual sayings will make all the difference. (2) Many of the studies involve going through long lists of disconnected proverbs. This can be done with Bibles, but it can be really good to print out the proverbs for people when there is a big list. This can really help people concentrate. A good website for printing lists of verses is bible.oremus.org, which uses the NRSV translation. (3) Some aspects of Proverbs, particularly the issue of corporal punishment, looked at in study 8, are controversial. Be ready for these. (4) You should feel free to mix up the order of the studies. Studies 1-3 go together; but it wouldn't be the end of the world to do some of the more practical studies earlier. This may even whet people's appetites for the more abstract stuff.

Proverbs is a strange book to our ears. There is much that is unfamiliar. Yet it contains powerful wisdom, and can be very fruitful in helping us with the nitty-gritty of discipleship, of loving God in real life amongst real people. I hope you will find it a blessing, as I have. — *Andrew Errington*

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Notes on individual studies

Studies 1

This study both introduces Proverbs and examines its central theme: wisdom. It begins by looking at Proverbs teaching of the value of wisdom and the way its fruit is shown in the contrast between the wise and the foolish. It then moves on to look at the great “hymn to wisdom” in chapter 8. A similar passage is found in Job 28, which you can look at if you have time. All of this background is finally brought to focus on the incredible New Testament proclamation that Jesus in fact *is* the wisdom of God.

Study 2

This study looks at the central theme of Proverbs, that the fear of the Lord is the heart of wisdom. It links this to the first study and concludes with Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount. In some ways this is a simple study; but the benefit will be in the reflection on the actual issues.

Study 3

This is a more difficult study, but its ideas are absolutely central to Proverbs and it needs to be dealt with early on. It looks at the fundamental theological claim of the book of Proverbs as a whole, the message that *righteousness works*. Proverbs is concerned with the question of wisdom – what way of life works in this world; and its ultimate answer is: the way of righteousness. This is why the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (study 2). The question this raises, however, is, what about when it doesn’t? This is the question of Ecclesiastes, which sees the righteous as faring no better than the wicked and so almost despairs that everything is “meaningless”! Proverbs itself is not unaware of this problem (as, I believe, Prov. 11:4, 18, 21; 12:28; 23:15-18 hint at); but it is not its main concern. The resolution to this dilemma is ultimately found only in the promise of resurrection and the assurance of final judgment. The aim of this study, therefore, is to raise this problem, see it for what it is, point to its resolution, and recognise that Proverbs needs to be understood in the light of that broader story – essentially, that is, this study attempts to situate Proverbs within its whole biblical context.

Study 4

This may be a fairly short study, possibly allowing time for extra prayer etc. In general, it consists in a look at a number of proverbs that can be reasonably grouped under the heading of virtue. They cover a number of issues, but they have particularly to do with ideas of temperament and character. These proverbs provide a really valuable opportunity for people to think about these deeper issues of character: what type of person do I want to be, in Christ? We often focus mainly on “doing” things of discipleship; but these proverbs focus on “being” questions. So take time over the questions that discuss the issues at the end. If you wanted, you might consider using Galatians 5:22, on the fruit of the Spirit, as a comparison to help think about Christian character.

Study 5

This is a relatively short study, but a terribly useful one. It deals with issues of guidance and its relationship to the wisdom of listening. It begins with proverbs that stress our limited perspective and God’s sovereignty and then moves to proverbs about listening. The idea that wisdom involves listening to advice and being willing to be rebuked is repeated again and again in proverbs, and every generation, perhaps especially ours, needs this reminder. Finally, the study looks at questions of who it is wise to listen to, and above all, the need to trust in God’s word for guidance.

Study 6

Following on from Study 5, this study looks at the teaching of Proverbs about wise speech. It moves from sayings that highlight the power of words, through the contrast made in proverbs between the speech of the wicked and righteous and its effects, to a concrete look at what Proverbs sees as good speech. Proverbs emphasises a number of things we don’t always think about, such as the wisdom of being very careful with our words, and the need to avoid gossip and false speech. This leads to a final consideration of Jesus’ stark words in Matthew 12:33-37, and then a call to cultivate truly good speech. This is an important area of discipleship (as

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Jesus makes very clear); and Proverbs can help us a great deal. Not all the questions will work perfectly, but it will be worth it to get through all the sayings.

Study 7

This study deals with economic life and the overlapping issues of wealth and poverty and work and laziness. Proverbs has strong teaching on all these areas, and it can be very helpful. There are a lot of sayings to get through, some quite odd; but persevere, because the combined effect is quite powerful. The study ends by looking at Jesus teaching in Luke 12:13-21, which is a helpful way of locating the material in Proverbs within the Bible's broader perspective. It is important to stress the negative ("be on your guard against all kinds of greed", v.15) but all also to think positively (how can we serve God with our money?).

Study 8

This study is in two main sections: Political life and Social life. The first deals specifically with what Good Government looks like and our relation to it. The second looks at how we should relate to wider society. The teaching of Proverbs is remarkably similar to two corresponding sections in Romans (12:14-21; 13:1-7 although the issues are in reverse order), which are used in the study to draw out the ideas. There will be plenty to talk about, and this can be broken up into two shorter studies. It may be helpful to draw out some of the ideas here by looking at Titus 3:1-7, which also deals with how Christians should relate to the world around them, including government.

Study 9

This study covers a lot of ground and traverses important, but potentially difficult topics. The first section covers general proverbs about family life. There are some really wonderful ones about the value of generations, and some funny, but potentially tricky ones about the "contentious" wife. Following from this there is a discussion of discipline of children. The best approach is to be careful and respectful of different views. The second section is about sexual purity. The passages are long and it takes a while to read them, but they are powerful if taken together, so it's good to keep going. Here is some of the most practical help in the Bible for issues of lust and sexual sin. Finally, this study looks at the description of the excellent wife which closes the book of Proverbs. This is not just a description of an impressive woman (in that culture), it's also a way of capping off the whole book of Proverbs.

Study 10

The last study focusses on some of the most fascinating sayings in the whole book of Proverbs: on "the heart". It flows from sayings about the heart to sayings about God's attributes, and then in particular to God's "weighing the heart". This leads to a discussion of Paul's confident humility before God's judgment in 1 Corinthians 4. These passages raise interesting and important questions about how we assess our lives. It will be worth going quite slowly through the first set of proverbs, as some of them require a bit of thought. Try to let people appreciate these sayings individually. This study will hopefully encourage a humility about our own hearts before God's final judgment, but with confidence that ultimately and amazingly, there will be "commendation" (1 Cor. 4:5).

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STUDY 1: A WORLD RUN ON WISDOM (OR, HOW THE WORLD DOES, ULTIMATELY, MAKE SENSE)

“Wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her” (8:11).

What basis do we have for believing that the world as a whole, the universe, makes sense?

The book of Proverbs has three main sections (1-9; 10:1-22:16; 22:17-31:31). Read the introductions to sections 1 and 3, in 1:1-6 and 22:17-21 *What, according to these introductions, is Proverbs all about?*

Read the following proverbs.

1:20-33 3:13-18 13:14 15:24 16:16 16:22 19:8 21:16 21:20 21:22 24:13-14
Why, according to these sayings, is wisdom so good?

Read the following proverbs and, in the space below, note the ways the wise and fools are characterised.

10:23	14:15	15:14	17:24	24:7
13:16	14:18	15:21	18:15	26:1-12
14:6	14:24	17:12	20:5	27:12
14:8	14:33	17:16	22:3	27:22
	15:7	17:21	22:10	28:26

The wise	Fools

Are there any sayings you particularly appreciate?

Read Proverbs 8:1–36. *How is wisdom described here? What do we learn about wisdom? Compare this passage with Job chapter 28. What similarities and differences do you notice?*

By way of conclusion, let us remember the New Testament’s claim that, in fact, *Jesus* is the wisdom of God. Have a look at 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 and Colossians 1:15–20 and 2:3. What do these claims mean in the light of Proverbs?

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STUDY 2: THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM (OR, WHY BELIEVING IN GOD IS A GOOD IDEA)

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” (9:10)

What do you think it is to be a wise person?

In the previous study, we saw that according to Proverbs, which is like a logic sown into the fabric of the world that is the basis of order, and which is essential to grasp for successful living. (We also saw the New Testament claim that Jesus *is* that wisdom—a claim that we are all probably still thinking through.) But for now, we want to begin to ask the question, what does it look like to be a person who is in touch with this “wisdom”, this logic of the universe? What does it look like to be wise?

Read Proverbs chapter 9. *How are wisdom and foolishness contrasted? What lies at the heart of the difference?*

According to Proverbs, wisdom starts with relating to God rightly. This is the basis of one of the central refrains running through the book, the idea of “the fear of the Lord.” Read the following proverbs and, as you go, mark any that stand out to you.

1:7	9:10	14:9	16:6	23:17
2:1-8	10:27	14:26-27	19:23	24:21-22
3:5-8	14:2	15:33	22:4	

Which of these did you think was especially powerful or important? Why?

Do all these proverbs make sense to you? If not, why not?

Read 2:1-8 and 3:5-8 again. *What do you think it means to fear the Lord?*

In what ways do you think we can “rely on our own insight” or “be wise in our own eyes”?

What do these proverbs see as the antidote to these mistakes? How can we do that?

Proverbs insists that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Read Jesus’ conclusion to the sermon on the mount in Matthew 7:24-27. *How does Jesus redefine what it is to be wise here? How does this fit with the idea of “the fear of the Lord?”*

Proverbs 23:17 says, “Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always continue in the fear of the Lord.” *How can we do that as Christians today?*

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STUDY 3: RIGHTEOUSNESS WORKS!

(OR, WHY CRIME DOESN'T REALLY PAY, IN THE END)

"The light of the righteous rejoices, but the lamp of the wicked goes out." (13:9)

Do you think the world is a generally just place? If not, do you think there is any justice?

In the previous study, we saw how Proverbs makes the striking claim that the starting point for being a wise person is to fear the Lord. This is the foundation of what is basically the central claim of Proverbs, namely, that what is wise is to be righteous. That is, Proverbs insists that righteousness *works*.

How is this connection made in the following proverbs?

3:31-35 4:10-15 9:9 14:2

One of the major reasons for this connection is what Proverbs sees as the inevitable consequences of wickedness and righteousness, which the following sayings explain. Read through this list and mark any that stand out especially.

10: 2-3	10:27-30	11:23	12:21	13:21-22	14:32	21:7	24:19-20
10:6-7	11:4-8	11:30-31	12:28	13:25	15:6	21:12	28:10
10:16	11:18-19	12:2-3	13:6	14:11	15:8-9	21:21	28:18
10:24-25	11:21	12:7	13:9	14:14	15:29	22:4	29:6
		12:12	13:15	14:19	16:17	24:15-16	29:16

How would you summarise the main message here?

Do you think there's any problem with this teaching? Does it always work like this?

Read the following passages from the book of Ecclesiastes: 2:12-17; 7:15-18; 9:11-12.

In what ways do these words stand against the teaching of Proverbs?

What, according to the author of Ecclesiastes, is the fundamental problem that undercuts this teaching in Proverbs that righteousness works and wickedness doesn't?

Turn back to Proverbs and read the following sayings: 11:4, 18, 21; 12:28; 23:15-18. *Do you think these sayings show a recognition of the problem faced by Ecclesiastes?*

Read the very end of Ecclesiastes (12:13-14), and then read John 5:25-29.

How does the promise of resurrection and ultimate judgment change the way we think about:

(a) the hopeless fear in the earlier passages of Ecclesiastes that death makes wisdom and righteousness meaningless?

(b) the teaching of Proverbs that righteousness pays off? (How, for example, can we understand sayings like Proverbs 14:14 or 13:9 in the light of the gospel?)

How might these reflections inspire us to live more godly lives?

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STUDY 4: THE WISDOM OF VIRTUE

(OR, WHY IT'S BETTER NOT TO BLOW YOUR TOP)

"One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city." (16:32)

What is a virtue? What virtues do you think are important in the Christian life?

Read through the following list of proverbs and try to group them under one of the headings below. Don't worry if they don't all fit perfectly. As you go through, make a mark next to any proverbs that you find particularly interesting or challenging.

3:3-4	15:18, 33	20:1, 3, 6, 7, 22	25:14, 16, 19, 26, 27-28
10:9, 12	16:5, 6, 18, 32	21:4, 5, 8, 10, 24, 29	27:2, 4, 21
11:2, 3, 16, 17, 20, 27	17:9, 13, 27	22:5	28:1, 14, 20
12:10, 16	18:12	23:19-21, 29-35	29:11, 22, 23, 25
14:16, 17, 29, 30	19:2, 11, 19, 22	24:8-9, 10-12, 17-18	30:12

Temper / Anger

Carefulness

Integrity / "crookedness"

Pride and humility

Loyalty and faithfulness

Self-control

Courage

Forgiveness and vengeance

Other

Did any of these proverbs particularly strike you? Why?

How would you sum up the overall impression these proverbs give of a wise and virtuous person?

Which of these virtues do you think you, or our Christian community in general, need to grow in? Why?

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STUDY 5: THE WISE LISTENER

(OR, WHY IT'S GOOD TO BE TOLD WHEN YOU'RE DOING SOMETHING DUMB)

"Those who are attentive to a matter will prosper, and happy are those who trust in the Lord." (16:20)

What things do you think you, or others you know, look to for guidance in the important aspects of life?

Read the following proverbs and consider: *What truths do these sayings remind us of? Do you think we need this reminder? Why, or why not?*

14:12 16:9 16:25 16:33 19:21 20:24 21:30 21:31 27:1.

What do you think these truths should mean for how we live and how we make decisions?

Read through the following proverbs and make a mark next to any that particularly strike you:

1:8-9	13:1	15:12	19:27
9:7-9	13:10	15:31-32	21:11
10:17	13:18	17:10	25:12
12:1	15:5	19:20	29:1
12:15	15:10	19:25	

Which of these proverbs appeal to you in particular? How would you summarise the message here?

Why do you think this idea is emphasised so frequently?

If you have time, have a look at how in the following proverbs, the same idea is used for Israel's military and political life: 11:14; 15:22; 20:18; 24:6

Read the following proverbs. *What do they teach us about who it is wise to listen to?*

10:8 12:5 12:26 13:13 16:29 19:16

How do you think we can apply this in our own context?

Read the following proverbs, and consider: *How does this advice make sense in the light of what we've been reading?*

3:5-8 3:11-12

How do you think you personally can become wiser person in the areas we have been looking at?

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STUDY 6: THE WISE SPEAKER

(OR, HOW TO SHUT UP)

“One who gives an honest answer gives a kiss on the lips.” (24:26)

Read the following proverbs which, in different ways, describe the power of words.

11:9 11:11 12:14 12:18 18:20 18:21 25:15 27:3

Do any of these sayings particularly stand out to you? Why do you think words are so powerful?

Read the following proverbs.

10:11	10:31-32	13:2	15:14	17:20
10:20	12:6	14:3	16:13	18:6-7
10:21	12:13	15:7	16:27	22:12

How are the righteous/wise and the wicked/fools contrasted in these verses?

Which descriptions particularly strike you?

What is the overall message of these proverbs?

Good Speech I

Read the following proverbs and mark any that particularly strike you.

10:14	12:23	15:28	18:13	21:23	27:14
10:19	13:3	17:27-28	18:17	23:9	29:20
11:12	15:2	18:2	20:25	26:4-5	30:32-33

How would you summarise the message of these proverbs?

Do you think we need to take notice of this encouragement to be careful in our speech? Why?

Good Speech II

Read the following proverbs and, again, mark any that strike you.

10:18	13:5	17:7	19:22	25:18	26:24-26
11:13	14:5	18:8	19:28	25:23	26:28
12:17	14:25	19:1	20:19	26:20	27:5
12:19	16:28	19:5	21:6	26:22	28:23
12:22	17:4	19:9	21:28	26:23	29:5

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What, according to these proverbs, makes for good speech?

Do you think we need to take special notice of any of these ideas? Why?

How might the advice of these proverbs about Good Speech be relevant to the way we communicate in other ways, e.g. over the internet?

Read Matthew 12:33-37. *How do Jesus' words here connect with ideas we've looked at in proverbs?*

Finally, read the following proverbs and consider: *How can we be people who value and cultivate speech that is truly good?*

15:1 15:4 15:23 16:24 18:4 20:15 24:26 25:11

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STUDY 7: MONEY, WORK, AND GOOD BUSINESS (OR, GOOD REASONS TO GET UP IN THE MORNING)

“The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.” (22:2)

How would you describe someone who was wise in regard to money and work?

Money, wealth, and poverty

Read the following proverbs.

10:15	13:23	18:11	21:17	22:22-23	28:25
10:22	14:20-21	18:23	21:26	23:1-8	28:27
11:24	14:31	19:4	22:1-2	28:6	29:7
11:28	15:15-17	19:6-7	22:7	28:8	29:13
12:9	15:25	19:17	22:9	28:11	30:7-9
13:7-8	16:8	21:13	22:16	28:20-22	30:13-14
13:11	17:5				

What are the main themes that come out in these proverbs?

Which sayings particularly stand out to you? Are there any you have trouble understanding?

Do you think we need to take special notice of any of these ideas? Why?

Wise work

a. Work and laziness

Read the following proverbs and make a mark next to any that strike you for any reason.

6:6-11	12:11	12:27	15:19	19:15	20:13	24:30-34
10:4	12:14	13:4	16:26	19:24	21:25	26:13-16
10:26	12:24	14:23	18:9	20:4	22:13	28:19

Which of these proverbs do you particularly like or find challenging?

How would you summarise the main message here?

Is it easy to be lazy at work these days? If so, in what ways can we avoid this temptation?

b. Prudent business

Read the following proverbs about shrewd business.

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3:27-28	11:26	16:11	17:23	20:16-17	21:14	24:27
11:1	14:4	17:8	20:10	20:21	22:26-27	27:13
11:15	15:27	17:18	20:14	20:23	22:29	27:23-27

Which of these sayings do you think are still relevant? In what ways? Which of them do you find hard to understand?

Keeping money in its place

Read Luke 12:13-21. *How does this parable strike you after all we've been reading? What is the same and what is different?*

What, according to Jesus, is the great danger with wealth?

Read Proverbs 3:9-10. *How can we be people who "honour the Lord with the first fruits of all our produce?"*

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STUDY 8: LIVING IN SOCIETY

(OR, HOW TO PUT UP WITH OTHER PEOPLE)

“When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when the wicked rule, the people groan.” (29:2)

Political Life

Why do you think we pay so much attention to politics and politicians?

The book of Proverbs has much to say about political life. Although some of its wisdom can seem odd to us in the modern day, we can learn a lot about what good political authority looks like from its teaching about the king and his responsibilities. Read the following proverbs and make a mark next to any that stand out to you.

11:10	16:12-15	18:5	20:8	21:1	24:21-22	28:3-5	29:18
14:28	17:11	19:10	20:18	21:15	24:23-25	29:4	29:26
14:34-35	17:15	19:12	20:26	22:11	25:2-7	29:12	30:29-31
16:10	17:26	20:2	20:28	23:1-3	28:2	29:14	31:1-9

Do any of these proverbs strike you as particularly insightful, or interesting, or confusing? Why?

What things, according to these sayings, make for good and just government?

Read the following proverbs which speak of the consequences of bad political authority:

28:12 28:15-16 28:28 29:2 29:16

Do you feel like these sayings ring true to what we hear about governments around the world?

Read Romans 13:1-7. *How does the apostle Paul’s description of good government parallel the teaching of Proverbs?*

From all this, what things do you think we should consider in deciding how to vote?

Social life

Read the following proverbs.

3:29-30	14:21	20:19	25:8-10	26:21	29:10
6:1-5	17:14	22:24-25	25:17	27:6	29:24
13:20	17:17	24:1	25:21-22	27:10	29:27
14:7	18:24	24:28-29	26:17-19	27:17	

How would you sum up the description given here of the person who is wise in the way they live amongst diverse people?

What, in particular, do these proverbs teach us about who it is wise to associate with?

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In what ways might these proverbs help us to know how to obey God's command to love our neighbours as ourselves?

Read Romans 12:14-21. *How do Paul's words here parallel the teaching of Proverbs?*

In what ways can you, personally, grow in the way you relate to your neighbours?

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STUDY 9: FAMILY AND HOME LIFE

(OR, WHY GETTING OLDER IS NOT NECESSARILY A DISASTER)

"The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands." (14:1)

What aspects of living as part of a family, or families, do you find particularly challenging?

Families and home life

Read the following proverbs which speak of wise family and home life. As you go, remember that these come from a different culture, and that many things have changed between then and now.

10:1	14:1	17:2	18:1	20:7	21:19	27:15-16	29:3
10:5	15:20	17:6	18:22	20:20	23:22-25	27:18	30:10
11:29	16:31	17:21	19:13-14	20:29	25:24	28:7	30:11
12:4	17:1	17:25	19:26	21:9	27:8	28:24	30:17

Do any of these sayings strike you as particularly wise or helpful? Do you find any particularly irrelevant?

A number of these sayings highlight the challenges a "contentious" wife can pose. What adjective might you emphasise if you were writing proverbs about difficult husbands, e.g. "disconnected" or "indifferent" or "passive"?

One significant theme in Proverbs is the importance of discipline of children. Read the following proverbs and then discuss the questions below. As you discuss, please bear in mind the sensitivity of this issue and the reality of differing opinions.

13:24 19:18 22:6 22:15 23:13-14 26:3 29:15 29:17 29:19 29:21

Do you think these sayings are still relevant? Why, or why not?

Could other methods of discipline be equally wise?

Sexual purity

Related to the issue of family and home life is the extensive teaching in Proverbs on sexual purity and adultery. Read the following passages, some of which are remarkably extended compared to most of Proverbs.

2:16-19 5:1-23 6:20-35 7:1-27 22:14 23:26-28 30:20

What things do these passages repeatedly emphasise?

How do these passages describe the allure of illicit sex? Why do you think these things are mentioned?

What do these passages commend as the wise path instead?

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How might this teaching help us to give practical advice to a friend who was struggling with looking at pornography?

An excellent wife

To conclude, read the description of a “capable,” or “noble,” wife in Proverbs 31:10-31. *What qualities stand out to you in this description?*

In what ways does this excellent wife sum up many of the themes of the book of Proverbs?

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STUDY 10: THE HEART AND ITS MASTER

(OR, WHY WE'RE NOT ROBOTS)

"All deeds are right in the sight of the doer, but the Lord weighs the heart." (21:2)

Do you ever find it hard to understand your own thoughts or actions? Why do you think that might be?

Read the following proverbs and for each consider: *What do you think this proverb means? Do you think it is insightful in any way?* Make a note of any that particularly strike you.

4:23	14:13	18:14	20:27
12:25	15:13	19:3	25:20
13:12	15:15	20:9	27:9
14:10	17:22	20:11	27:19

Read the following proverbs and group them under the ideas below.

6:16-19	15:29	18:10	21:12
15:3	16:4	20:12	22:12
15:8-9	16:7	20:22	29:13
15:25-26	17:5	21:3	30:5-6

loves righteousness and hates wickedness

is sovereign

GOD

cares about justice

is trustworthy

Can you think of any other places in the Bible where these characteristics of God are emphasised?

Read the following proverbs, which connect these two ideas of God and the heart.

15:11 16:2 17:3 21:2 24:(10-)12

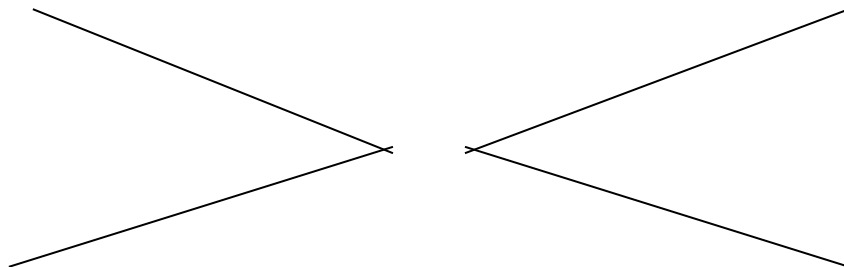
What difference does this teaching make to the way we reflect on our lives and think about how we're going as Christians?

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Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5. *In what ways does Paul's sense of himself reflect the teaching of Proverbs?*

Is there anything about Paul's confidence, especially in verse 5, that surprises you?

How can we be people who both respect that, "it is the Lord who judges", and also "keep our hearts with all vigilance" (Prov. 4:23)?



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APPENDIX: Proverbs arranged by theme

OVERARCHING IDEAS

The value of Wisdom (and the consequence of folly)

1:1-6
1:20-33 (Wisdom personified)
2:1-3:2
3:5-10, 13-18, 19-20, 21-26
4:1-27, esp. 5-9
4:6, 8-9 (Wisdom personified)
6:12-15
8:1-36 (Wisdom personified)
8:10-11, 18-21, 35-36
9:1-6 (Wisdom personified)
9:11-12, 18
13:14
15:24
16:16, 22, 23
19:8, 29
21:16, 20, 22
22:17-21
23:12, 15-18
24:3-7, 13-14
30:(1-4)

The wise and fools in life.

9:13-18
10:23
13:16
14:6, 8, 15, 18, 24, 33
15:7, 14, 21
17:12, 16, 21, 24
18:15
20:5
22:3, 10
24:7
26:1-12
27:12, 22
28:26
29:8-9

The fear of the Lord

1:7
2:1-8
3:5-10
9:10
10:27
14:2, 9, 26-27
15:33
16:(6),
19:23
22:4
23:(17)
24:21-22
31:30

The fates of the wicked and the righteous

1:10-19
3:31-35
10: 2, 3, 6, 7, 16, 24-25, 27, 28, 29, 30
11:4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 18, 19, 21, 23, 30-31,
12:2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 12, 20, 21, 28
13:6, 9, 15, 21, 22, 25
14:11, 14, 19, 22, 32,
15:6, 8-9, 29,
16:(7), 17
17:19, 20
20:(17),
21:7, 12, 18, 21, 27
22:4
24:15-16, 19-20
26:(27)
28:10, 13, 18
29:6, 16

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THE WISE AND RIGHTEOUS LIFE

The wisdom of virtue

t=temper, c=caution, i=integrity, ph=pride and humility, l=loyalty and faithfulness, sc=self-control
3:3-4(l)
10:9(i), 12
11:2(ph), 3(i), 16(b), 17, 20, 27
12:10, 16(t)
14:16(c), 17(t), 29(t), 30(t),
15:18(t), 33(ph)
16:5(ph), 6(l), 18(ph), 32(t)
17:9, 13, 27(t)
18:12(ph)
19:2(c), 11(t), 19(t), 22(l)
20:1(w), 3(t), 6(l), 7(i), 22
21:4(ph), 5(c), 8, 10, 24, 29(c)
22:5(c)
23:19-21(sc), 29-35(sc)
24:8-9, 10-12(b), 17-18
25:14, 16(sc), 19(l), 26(b), 27-28(sc)
27:2(p), 4, 20, 21(p)
28:1(b), 14(b), 20(l)
29:11(t), 22(t), 23(ph), 25(b)
30:12

Guidance and God's sovereignty

3:5-8
14:12,
16:3, 9, 25 (cf. 14:12), 33
19:21
20:24
21:30, 31
27:1 (cf. Js 4:14)

Wise listening (Being teachable)

1:8-9
3:11-12
9:7-9
10:8, 17,
11:14
12:1, 5, 15, 26
13:1, 10, 13, 18
15:5, 10, 12, 22, 31-32
16:20, 29
17:10
19:16, 20, 25, 27
20:18,
21:11
24:6
25:12
29:1

ECONOMIC LIFE

Wise speech

10:11, (13), 14, 18-21, 31-32
11:9, 11, 12, 13
12:6, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 22, 23
13:2, 3, 5
14:3, 5, 25
15:1, 2, 4, 7, 14, 23, 26, 28
16:1, (10), 13, 21, 24, 27, 28
17:4, 7, 20, 27-28
18:2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 13, (17), 20, 21
19:1, 5, 9, 22, 28
20:15, 19, 25
21:6, 23, 28
23:9, 16
24:26, (28-29)
25:11, 12, 15, 18, 23, 25
26:2, 4-5, 7, 9, 20, 22, 23, 24-26, 28
27:3, 5, 14
28:23
29:5, 20
30:32-33
31:26

The wisdom of sexual purity

2:16-19
5:1-23
6:20-35
7:1-27
22:14
23:26-28
30:20

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Money, wealth and poverty

10:4, 15, 22
11:24, 25, 28
12:9
13:7, 8, 11, 23,
14:20, 21, 31,
15:15-17, 25
16:8
17:5
18:11, 23
19:4, 6, 7, 17
21:13, 17, 26
22:1, 2, 7, 9, 16, 22-23
23:1-8
28:6, 8, 11, 20-22, 25, 27
29:7, 13
30:7-9, 13-14,
31:20

Work and laziness

6:6-11
10:4, 26,
12:11, 14, 24, 27,
13:4,
14:23
15:19
16:26
18:9
19:15, 24
20:4, 13,
21:25
22:13
24:27, 30-34
26:13-16
28:19
31:13-19, 27

The wisdom of honest business

3:27-28
11:1, 15, 16, 26
14:4,
15:27,
16:11,
17:8(?!), 18, 23
20:10, 14, 16, (17), 21, 23
21:14
22:26-27, 29
26:6
27:13, 23-27

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SOCIAL LIFE

Family and household

10:1, 5
11:29
12:4
13:24
14:1
15:20
16:31
17:1, 2, 6, 17, 21, 25
18:1, 22
19:13, 14, 18, 26
20:7, 20, 29, 30
21:9, 19
22:6, 15
23:13-14, 22-25
25:24 (cf. 21:9)
26:3, 17-19
27:8, (11), 15-16, 18
28:7, 24
29:3, 15, 17, 19, 21
30:10, 11, 17
31:10-31

Neighbours and friends

3:29-30
6:1-5
13:20,
14:7, 21
17:14, 17,
18:24
20:19
22:24-25
24:1, 28-29
25:8-10, 17, 21-22 (cf. Rom. 12:20)
26:21
27:6, 10
29:10, 24, 27

Political life

11:10
14:28, 34, 35
16:10, 12, 13, 14, 15,
17:11, 15, 26
18:5, 17, 18, 19
19:10, 12
20:2, 8, 18, 26, 28
21:1, 15
22:8, 11, 28
23:1-3, 10-11
24:21-22, 23-25
25:1-7
28:2, 3, 4-9, 12, 15-16, 17, 28
29:2, 4, 8, 9, 12, 14, 16, 18, 26
30:29-31
31:1-9

Life with the Grain of the Universe: Proverbs

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT REALITY

God

3:11-12

6:16-19

15:3, 8, 9, 11, 25, 26, 29

16:4, 7

17:3, (5), 15

18:10

19:3

20:12, 22

21:2, 3, 12

22:12

24:12

29:13

30:5-6

The Heart

4:23

12:25,

13:12

14:10, 13

15:11, 13, 15

16:2

17:22

18:14

20:9, 11, 27 (cf. 1 Cor. 2:11!)

21:2

25:20

27:9, 19

Miscellaneous observations

11:22

13:17, 19

15:30

16:30

18:3, 16

25:13

27:7, 17

30:15-16, 18-19, 21-23, 24-28