

**Good Word Schedule**  
**“Proverbs”**  
**January, February, March 2015**

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**Theme: “The Call of Wisdom”**

**Leading Question:** “Go to the ant thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise” (Prov. 6:6). What does the Holy Spirit have to do with a proverb like that?

The book of Proverbs is full of clever observations, many attributed to Solomon, but some to other wise men. Nothing in the book suggests that these nuggets of wisdom came from visions or voices directly from God. They appear simply to be clever statements from clever people. Are they inspired? That is what both Jews and Christians have maintained. In fact, if one looks carefully at the Bible, it is clear that its contents have come by a mix of three ways:

**1) Visions or voices, that is by way of “special” revelation.** Daniel and Revelation would be the most obvious examples from the Bible.

**2) Research.** Passages like 1 Chronicles 29:29 and Luke 1:1-4 suggest that part of the Bible came to us as a result of research on the part of the inspired writers.

**3) Personal experience.** The New Testament book of 1 Corinthians clearly states that the content was not triggered by visions and supernatural voices but by rumors passed on to Paul by the house of Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11). Similarly, the proverbs seem to come by way of human observation and are then put into words by a clever wordsmith.

The church has always claimed that the book is “inspired” even if there are no bells and whistles announcing visions and revelations. Still, the result has been claimed as the work of the Spirit, even though the role of the Spirit is not revealed in any tangible form in the book itself. Believers hold the book to be canonical and inspired by the Holy Spirit, even though it says nothing about visions or voices heard from on high. I suspect that we have been led astray by frequent references to the Bible as “God’s revealed word,” a phrase that implies that the whole Bible came by way of visions or revelation. The book of Proverbs can help counteract that impression.

But it has not been easy for the church to recognize the obvious signs of human activity in the book. At mid-century, the SDA Bible Commentary did not say clearly that the book is obviously a compilation of compilations. At first glance, the statement in 1:1 that these are proverbs of Solomon could easily be taken to refer to the entire book. But 10:1 introduces another collection (“The Proverbs of Solomon”) and 25:1 declares that the men of Hezekiah compiled additional proverbs. Hezekiah lived some 250 years after Solomon’s day. Remarkably, our official study guide states without qualification that Agur, the named author of Proverbs 30, was a non-Israelite. In 1954, when the third volume of the SDA Bible Commentary was published with its comments on Proverbs, that was not the case. The SDABC suggested that Agur was simply another name for Solomon.

These are questions that can help us explore the nature of the book and its inspiration.

**1. How can one preserve the sense of the sacred nature of the Proverbs in light of the very human the way that they were developed?**

**2. How can the Spirit of God be involved with apparently contradictory proverbs?** The nature of Proverbs is described in verse by these lines from Jane Merchant:

“He who hesitates is lost”  
or “Look before you leap.”  
The sages proffer good advice  
To spur us on to victory  
In sayings pithy and concise  
And flatly contradictory.

Given the nature of human experience, are we not constantly faced with situations which call for “contradictory” counsel? Some people are too quick, some are too slow. We wouldn’t dare give them both the same proverb! Which just illustrates that not all of Scripture applies universally in all situations. That reinforces the perspective expressed in 1 Cor. 10:11 that Scripture is simply a book full of inspired “examples”: “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come” (NIV). Not all examples apply to all situations, but all the examples are still provided us by God and inspired by His Spirit.

**3. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7).** How can we readily distinguish between fear as “fright” and fear as “awe”? Is there any link between the two? When Moses obeyed the command of the Lord at the burning bush to take off his sandals (Exod. 3:5), to what extent was that simply “awe” and to what extent was it real, bone-shaking “terror”? How does Scripture itself shed light on this question in Exod. 3:5-6 (NIV)?

5 “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” 6 Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

**4. Lady Wisdom.** In much of Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman. Read the counsel in chapters 2 and 3. Is paying attention to such wise “human” counsel a divine method for protecting us from moral dangers? Can one draw a distinct line between that which is human and that which is divine?

**Comment:** Like the incarnation which mysteriously blends the human and divine natures in Christ, so Scripture mysteriously blends the two. It is impossible to separate the human from the divine.

**Theme: From Ears to Feet**

**Leading Question:** “Is doing right more important than giving God the credit?”

In the three chapters which are the focus of our study this week – Proverbs 4, 5, and 6 – explicit references to God are not frequent. God is not mentioned at all in 4, twice in 5 and once in 6.

Remarkably, the “Sayings of Agur” in Proverbs 30 do include two prayers, the only ones in the book. The first (Prov. 30:1-4) is a rather skeptical lament, echoing sentiments found in Job 38. Agur simply expresses puzzlement over the things of God. The second is a simple request for providential intervention in everyday life:

30:7 “Two things I ask of you, Lord;  
do not refuse me before I die:  
8 Keep falsehood and lies far from me;  
give me neither poverty nor riches,  
but give me only my daily bread.  
9 Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you  
and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’  
Or I may become poor and steal,  
and so dishonor the name of my God.” (NIV)

That’s a step up from Ecclesiastes, the “wisdom” book that comes immediately after Proverbs in our English Bible. In Ecclesiastes, there are no prayers, no hallelujahs. The counsel of Ecclesiastes is clear and terse:

5:1 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.  
2 Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. (NIV)

The differences between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes make the question of the role of wisdom literature in a believing community even more tantalizing. As shown below, Proverbs refers to the divine, on average, 2.5x per page; Ecclesiastes, 3x per page. And Ecclesiastes never uses LORD/Yahweh, the specific reference to Israel’s God – not even once. Fascinating....

Chapters in Proverbs: 31; Chapters in Ecclesiastes: 12  
Pages for Proverbs in my edition of the NIV: 33; pages for Ecclesiastes: 10  
Number of pages for Proverbs in Snaith’s Hebrew Bible: 37; for Ecclesiastes: 13  
Occurrences of YAHWEH/LORD in Proverbs: 86x; in Ecclesiastes: None (!)  
Occurrences of Elohim/God (or equivalent) Proverbs: 8x; Ecclesiastes: 40x

Distribution of references to deity in the chapters in Proverbs:

0x: 5 chapters (4, 7, 13, 26, 27)  
1x: 3 chapters (6, 23, 31)  
2x: 6 chapters (1, 5, 9, 12, 18, 25)  
3x: 5 chapters (8, 11, 24, 18, 29)  
4x: 3 chapters (2, 10, 17)  
5x: 2 chapters (19, 21)  
6x: 4 chapters (14, 20, 22, 30)  
9x: 2 chapters (3, 15)  
11x: 1 chapter (16)

Distribution of references to deity in the chapters in Ecclesiastes:

0x: 2 chapters (4, 10)  
1x: 1 chapter (1)  
2x: 3 chapters (6, 9, 11)  
3x: 2 chapters (2, 12)  
5x: 2 chapters (7, 8)  
8x: 1 chapter (3)  
9x: 1 chapter (5)

On balance, it would appear that Ecclesiastes is more “religious” than Proverbs, even though the author of Ecclesiastes struggles to make sense out of the world. Note the contrasting attitudes in these two quotes, the first, a familiar one from Proverbs, the second from Ecclesiastes:

“Go to the ant, you sluggard;  
consider its ways and be wise!” (Prov. 6:6, NIV)

“The race is not to the swift  
or the battle to the strong,  
nor does food come to the wise  
or wealth to the brilliant  
or favor to the learned;  
but time and chance happen to them all.” (Eccl. 9:11, NIV)

**Question:** How do we make room for a pessimist like Ecclesiastes in a believing community that stresses hope and joy?

**Question:** Is it better to be good without God, than to be evil and constantly have his name on our lips?

The “secular” proverbs might suggest that it is possible to be helpful and moral without God. How should we react to the suggestion of the fourth-century monk Evagrius, as cited by Kathleen Norris: “Better a gentle, worldly man than a quarrelsome [Norris: irascible] and wrathful monk”? – Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, 127, citing Evagrius (345-399 AD).

**Question:** Does a person with God on the lips always reflect God's character?

**Question:** Is it possible that temperament plays a role in our perspectives on God? If so, how can we determine what proportion of piety ("godliness") is the right proportion?

A comparison of the biblical books of Kings and Chronicles reveals that the same story can be told with God playing a key role or with no mention of God at all. Notice the difference in how the story of Ahab and Jehoshaphat is told in Kings and in Chronicles. The addition in Chronicles has been italicized in the quotation given below:

1 Kings 11:32 When the captains of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, they said, "It is surely the king of Israel." So they turned to fight against him; and Jehoshaphat cried out. 33 When the captains of the chariots saw that it was not the king of Israel, they turned back from pursuing him. (NRSV)

2 Chronicles 18: 31 When the captains of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, they said, "It is the king of Israel." So they turned to fight against him; and Jehoshaphat cried out, *and the Lord helped him. God drew them away from him,* 32 for when the captains of the chariots saw that it was not the king of Israel, they turned back from pursuing him. (NRSV)

**Question:** Is the author of Chronicles a more privileged believer because of his "godly" addition? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells that deeds are more important than vocabulary:

**Matthew 7:21** (NIV) "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' 23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

**Theme: A Matter of Life and Death.**

**Leading Question:** When can we know that a duty is a matter of life and death?"

**Note:** In Proverbs 7, “commands” are directly linked with warnings against adultery. In Proverbs, adultery is presented as *the* life and death issue. Other issues are seen as less important. For the vividness of the adultery warning, see 2:16 - 19; 6:20 - 35; 7:1-27. Here we cite the most forceful passage, 7:1-5 (NIV):

- 7:1 My son, keep my words  
and store up my **commands** within you.
- 2 Keep my **commands** and you will live;  
guard my teachings as the apple of your eye.
- 3 Bind them on your fingers;  
write them on the tablet of your heart.
- 4 Say to wisdom, “You are my sister,”  
and to insight, “You are my relative.”
- 5 They will keep you from the adulterous woman,  
from the wayward woman with her seductive words.

**1. Compassion vs. the practical dangers of becoming surety for someone else.** Several times Proverbs warns against the danger of putting up security for someone (6:1-5; 11:15; 17:18; 22:26, 27). Are there times when Christian compassion could make an exception if a person or family was in genuine need? Prov. 6:1-5 is perhaps the most vivid warning:

- 6:1 (NIV) My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor,  
if you have shaken hands in pledge for a stranger,
- 2 you have been trapped by what you said,  
ensnared by the words of your mouth.
- 3 So do this, my son, to free yourself,  
since you have fallen into your neighbor’s hands:  
Go—to the point of exhaustion—  
and give your neighbor no rest!
- 4 Allow no sleep to your eyes,  
no slumber to your eyelids.
- 5 Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter,  
like a bird from the snare of the fowler.

**2. Seven things the Lord hates (secular vs. religious objections?). Can we rank them?** The list of seven abominations that the Lord hates invites our analysis from two perspectives:

1) Would secularists and members of other faith communities also recognize these seven issues as being serious?

2) Could we put these items in some kind of hierarchy? Are some sins more serious than others?

6:16 There are six things the Lord hates,  
seven that are detestable to him:

17 haughty eyes,  
a lying tongue,  
hands that shed innocent blood,  
18 a heart that devises wicked schemes,  
feet that are quick to rush into evil,  
19 a false witness who pours out lies  
and a person who stirs up conflict in the community. (NIV)

**3. A hierarchy of values.** In Proverbs 6, two “sins” are considered less serious than the sin of adultery: prostitution and stealing. Here are the passages:

6:26 For a prostitute can be had for a loaf of bread,  
but another man’s wife preys on your very life.

6:30 People do not despise a thief if he steals  
to satisfy his hunger when he is starving.

31 Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold,  
though it costs him all the wealth of his house.

32 But a man who commits adultery has no sense;  
whoever does so destroys himself.

33 Blows and disgrace are his lot,  
and his shame will never be wiped away.

34 For jealousy arouses a husband’s fury,  
and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge.

35 He will not accept any compensation;  
he will refuse a bribe, however great it is.

**Note on adultery:** Old Testament scholars often summarize the OT view of marriage and adultery as follows: A woman can only sin against her own marriage, a man can only sin against someone else’s. While the OT indicates that dallying with prostitutes is not advisable, a married man does not formally jeopardize his own marriage if he consorts with a prostitute. But if he is involved with a married woman, i.e. a woman who is bound to another man by a promise, the matter is serious indeed. Though there is no record in the Old Testament of the death penalty being applied in the case of adultery, the practical consequences (according to Proverbs) are serious indeed. And that is illustrated in the case of King David.. Though the death penalty was not enforced against the king, the narrative in Samuel-Kings makes it clear that David’s adultery destroyed the king’s moral authority in his own family.



**Theme: Divine Wisdom**

**Leading Question:** Proverbs celebrates wisdom. But can wisdom become dangerous?

In popular thinking, education is often seen by ordinary people as something that puts faith at risk. But we should distinguish between education and knowledge on the one hand, and wisdom on the other. In the Old Testament, wisdom is always positive, whereas knowledge without wisdom can be volatile and dangerous.

In Proverbs “Wisdom” is depicted as a woman of great worth. But in Proverbs 8 and 9 she has an alluring counterpart named “Folly.” They both set up housekeeping in the best location in town and seek to entice the “simple.” Is the choice between them difficult?

8:1 Does not wisdom call out?

Does not understanding raise her voice?

2 **At the highest point along the way,  
where the paths meet, she takes her stand;**

3 beside the gate leading into the city,  
at the entrance, she cries aloud:

4 “To you, O people, I call out;  
I raise my voice to all mankind.

5 You who are **simple**, gain prudence;  
you who are foolish, set your hearts on it.

9:3 She has sent out her servants, and she calls  
from the **highest point of the city**,

4 “Let all who are **simple** come to my house!”

9:13 Folly is an unruly woman;  
she is simple and knows nothing.

14 She sits at the door of her house,  
on a seat at the **highest point of the city**,

15 calling out to those who pass by,  
who go straight on their way,

16 “Let all who are **simple** come to my house!”

To those who have no sense she says,

17 “Stolen water is sweet;  
food eaten in secret is delicious!”

18 But little do they know that the dead are there,  
that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead.

**The Presence of the Lord.** Note the places in chapters 8 and 9 where Proverbs deliberately introduces the LORD. Would these points be where humans are most vulnerable?

8:13 To fear the Lord is to hate evil;  
I hate pride and arrogance,  
evil behavior and perverse speech.

8:35 For those who find me find life  
and receive favor from the Lord.  
36 But those who fail to find me harm themselves;  
all who hate me love death.”

9:10 The **fear of the Lord** is the beginning of wisdom,  
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

**Note:** “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” is found in 1:7 and 9:10, but the companion line differs. In 9:10 (cited above) the second line presents a synonymous parallel; but in 1:7, the second line presents a contrast:

1:7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,  
but fools despise wisdom and instruction. (NIV)

**Question:** From a pedagogical perspective, which is more effective, two positives as in 9:10 or a positive and a negative as in 1:7? Would some respond better to one than the other? And would it be possible that in some cases a double negative might actually be most effective?

**Theme: Blessings of the Righteous**

**Leading Question:** Do the “secular” proverbs make sense to believers and non-believers alike?

Proverbs 10 introduces a new compilation, this one of Solomonic proverbs. Derek Kidner, in his Tyndale Old Testament Commentary on Proverbs, suggests that what precedes in chapters 1-9 is probably not from Solomon, but is a general introduction to the pithy proverbs of Solomon that come from 10:1 on. The argument is that if chapters 1 to 9 were from Solomon, the title in 10:1 would read, “These *also* are proverbs of Solomon,” thus paralleling the heading in 25:1.

The four chapters that constitute the focus of our discussion for this week (10-13), contain a shower of pithy proverbs, most of them antithetical, contrasting the good guys and the bad guys, a pattern that is set in verse 10:1:

A wise son brings joy to his father,  
but a foolish son brings grief to his mother.

The first exception to that pattern comes in 10:10 where a synonymous parallelism appears:

Whoever winks maliciously causes grief,  
and a chattering fool comes to ruin.

For purposes of discussion, our focus here will be on one key element noted in several proverbs: lying and deceit. Underlying all these proverbs is the question of whether the “truth” of these proverbs would be recognized by religious people and secular people alike.

**Lying and Deceit:** The following proverbs all have a bearing on the question of lying and deceit:

10:18 Whoever conceals hatred with lying lips  
and spreads slander is a fool.

11:1 The Lord detests dishonest scales,  
but accurate weights find favor with him.

12:17 An honest witness tells the truth,  
but a false witness tells lies.

12:20 Deceit is in the hearts of those who plot evil,  
but those who promote peace have joy.

12:22 The Lord detests lying lips,  
but he delights in people who are trustworthy.

**Question:** Is the truth of these proverbs self-evident to any observer, whether a believer or not?

**Note:** One needs to move beyond the book of Proverbs to understand how the Old Testament as a whole views truth telling. The eighth command in the decalogue is the one that focuses on the question: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod. 20:16). Note the interesting qualification: “against” your neighbor. In fact, in the Old Testament one can make a good argument that the command prohibits self-interested falsehood, not all falsehood. The exceptions (in the OT) generally can be summarized as follows: **When a evil person is seeking to destroy innocent people, then it is appropriate to mislead the evil doer in order to protect the innocent.** Three Old Testament examples establish the point:

### 1. Mid-wives to Pharaoh in Exodus 1:15-21:

**Exodus 1:15** The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, **16** “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” **17** The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. **18** Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?” **19** The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.” **20** So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. **21** And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own. (NIV)

### 2. Samuel to Saul at the anointing of David in 1 Sam. 16:1-4:

**Note:** The dialogue between God and Samuel is particularly interesting here because of the way Ellen White treats the narrative in *Patriarchs and Prophets*. Not wanting to raise the issue of “situationism” in a devotional setting, she drops out Samuel’s complaint about the dangers involved. The resulting text reads smoothly without it and devotional readers would not notice the break – unless they know the passage in 1 Samuel 16 well enough to recognize what Ellen White as done. Note the ellipses marks in *Patriarchs and Prophets*. The omission is highlighted in the following KJV quotation:

**1 Samuel 16:1** And the Lord said unto Samuel, How long wilt thou mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? fill thine horn with oil, and go, I will send thee to Jesse the Bethlehemite: for I have provided me a king among his sons. **2** *And Samuel said, How can I go? if Saul hear it, he will kill me. And the Lord said, Take an heifer with thee, and say, I am come to sacrifice to the Lord.* **3** And call Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will shew thee what thou shalt do: and thou shalt anoint unto me him whom I name unto thee. **4** And Samuel did that which the Lord spake, and came to

Bethlehem. And the elders of the town trembled at his coming, and said, Comest thou peaceably? 5 And he said, Peaceably: I am come to sacrifice unto the Lord.”

*Patriarchs and Prophets*, 637: “And the Lord said unto Samuel, How long wilt thou mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? fill thine horn with oil, and go, I will send thee to Jesse the Bethlehemite: for I have provided Me a king among his sons. . . . Take an heifer with thee, and say, I am come to sacrifice to the Lord. And call Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show thee what thou shalt do: and thou shalt anoint unto Me him whom I name unto thee. And Samuel did that which the Lord spake, and came to Bethlehem. And the elders of the town trembled at his coming, and said, Comest thou peaceably? And he said, Peaceably.”

### **3. Hushai to Absalom at David’s urging in 2 Sam. 15 to 17:**

**Note:** Hushai, a counselor deeply loyal to his master David, joined the king’s entourage as they were fleeing from Jerusalem ahead of David’s rebel son Absalom. David already knew that another of his counselors, Ahithophel, had defected to Absalom. So he urged Hushai to return to Jerusalem, confess loyalty to Absalom, while planning all along to defeat Absalom’s goal of dethroning his father David.

When Absalom entered the city of Jerusalem, he consulted Ahithophel on the best course of action. Ahithophel’s advice was two-fold: 1) Sleep with David’s concubines in the sight of all Israel and 2) Pursue David immediately, killing the king, but bringing everyone else back safely.

Absalom followed the first piece of advice, sleeping with the concubines, but then he consulted Hushai to see if he would concur with Ahithophel’s counsel on military action. All this was preceded by an intense dialogue between Absalom and Hushai when the latter had first come to Absalom to offer his services. “So this is the love you show your friend?” taunted Absalom. “If he’s your friend, why didn’t you go with him?” (2 Sam. 16:17, NIV).

Hushai responded by spinning out a whole fistful of bold-faced lies, seeking to convince Absalom that his transfer of loyalty was genuine. Apparently he succeeded, because Absalom was coming to him for a second opinion on how to deal with David. Hushai politely disagreed with Ahithophel’s counsel, urging a delay until all Israel could pursue the king. And in that connection the biblical comment is very revealing: “Absalom and all the men of Israel said, ‘The advice of Hushai the Arkite is better than that of Ahithophel.’ For the Lord had determined to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel in order to bring disaster on Absalom” (2 Sam. 17:14, NIV).

In short, not only are David and Hushai collaborating on a web of falsehoods, but Scripture says that God himself was behind it all in order to defeat Absalom. Note, however, that the rule stated above is fully illustrated here: Absalom was an evil character in pursuit of innocent victims. Under those circumstances, Scripture does not hesitate to affirm that the culprit should not be told the truth. Ellen White’s comment is intriguing, for though she seems to have avoided the issue of “situationism” in reporting the dialogue between Samuel and God over David’s anointing, here she **affirms** what David and Hushai did. The key phrase, “as by a divine enlightenment” is highlighted in the quotation below.

“And David said, O Lord, I pray Thee, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness.” Upon reaching the top of the mount, the king bowed in prayer, casting upon God the burden of his soul and humbly supplicating divine mercy. His prayer seemed to be at once answered. Hushai the Archite, a wise and able counselor, who had proved himself a faithful friend to David, now came to him with his robes rent and with earth upon his head, to cast in his fortunes with the dethroned and fugitive king. David saw, *as by a divine enlightenment* [emphasis added], that this man, faithful and truehearted, was the one needed to serve the interests of the king in the councils at the capital. At David’s request Hushai returned to Jerusalem to offer his services to Absalom and defeat the crafty counsel of Ahithophel.” – *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 735.

Yet for all that, the basic thrust of the proverbs on deceit and lying would be whole-heartedly affirmed by believers and honest secularists alike. Those apparently rare exceptions do not throw everything into chaos. Instead they confirm the carefully nuanced thrust of the 8<sup>th</sup> command, that one should not bear false witness *against* one’s neighbor. And that important nuance is confirmed in the Mosaic legislation when the penalty administered to the false witness is laid out in Deuteronomy 19:16-21:

**Deuteronomy** 19:16 If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse someone of a crime, 17 the two people involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the Lord before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. 18 The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against a fellow Israelite, 19 then do to the false witness as that witness intended to do to the other party. You must purge the evil from among you. 20 The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you. 21 Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. (NIV)

The following article/book chapter places the whole discussion in the context of Jesus’ 2<sup>nd</sup> great command “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39, NRSV) and Jesus’ one-verse summary of the Old Testament: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12, NRSV).

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## **"Thou shalt not hurt thy neighbor with lies or with the truth"**

By Alden Thompson

Commentary on the ninth command, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor," *Signs of the Times*, November 1988, 20-22. Published as "When the Truth Is a Lie," in Russell Holt, ed., *Lyrics of Love: God's Top Ten*. Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1988, 79-86 [revised short version].

**STORY #1:** Louise was a gentle child and beautiful – at least she was at the moment.

Her father was a violent and unpredictable man. More than once she had paid the price for his outbursts. The telltale marks were on her arms and face. A pretty dress covered the ones on her back.

Three houses down lived the Martins, a retired pastor and his wife. Devout and gentle Christians, the Martins had struck up a friendship with Louise. When the violence in her own home became unbearable, she would slip over to theirs.

Now Louise's dad stood at the Martin's door, fists clenched, eyes blazing. "Is my daughter here?" he shouted.

She was. How should Pastor Martin respond?

**STORY #2.** As John Wilcox drove home, he pondered the bad news from the mechanic. John's sleek little car, just 3000 miles out of warranty, looked like it was headed for a major engine overhaul. A casual observer wouldn't notice – not yet. But the mechanic was a man of integrity and experience. John knew the cure would cost big bucks.

Another option would be to sell. Hardly a week went by without someone asking John if he would part with his car. It was a popular model, in spotless condition, pampered and polished both inside and out. Furthermore, John could flash a meticulous service record. He had followed the manufacturer's recommendations to a fault.

What should John tell a prospective buyer?

**STORY #3.** Carmen had just returned to the dorm from a shopping trip in town. She had stumbled across a couple of real bargains and could scarcely wait to share her elation with friends on her hall.

"Friends" might not be quite the right word, for Carmen didn't fit in all that well. In polite language, one would say she lacked social graces. She was something of a master at breaking into conversations at the wrong moment and showing up when she was neither invited nor wanted.

As she rushed into the hall with her purchases in hand, she met Debbie, a vivacious and popular girl on campus, but one who was also caring and sensitive. "Look at my new dress," bubbled Carmen. Debbie's heart sank. The fabric was good quality, but the style was dated and the design would hardly compliment Carmen's figure.

Debbie struggled with her feelings about Carmen. She wanted to be helpful; she wanted to be nice. What should she say?

"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." How does this ninth command

help us respond to these three incidents?

Is God telling us in the command simply to love the truth and hate lies? That's part of the story, to be sure. Scripture is uncommonly blunt in that respect. Two of the seven "abominations" which the Lord hates are "a lying tongue" and "a false witness who breathes out lies" (Prov. 6:16-19, RSV). The father of lies is the devil (John 8:44). By contrast, Jesus came "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), admonishing us to worship God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24), and promising that "the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

But simply talking about truth and lies captures neither the full thrust of the ninth command nor the spirit of the decalogue as a whole. When we listen to Jesus and the writers of the New Testament, it becomes clear that the *real* focus of the commandments is on the neighbor. Jesus put it this way: "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12, RSV). Here is Jesus' one-verse summary of the Old Testament, the guiding principle for Pastor Martin, John Wilcox, and Debbie. And for us.

Elsewhere Jesus spoke of two great commands upon which all the others depend: loving God wholeheartedly and loving your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37-40). Paul claims that the whole law (including the command not to bear false witness) is summed up in that command to love your neighbor as yourself (Rom. 13:9).

The second table of the decalogue does give us a string of commands dealing with specific wrong acts: killing, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness. But the common thread uniting them all is the focus on the *neighbor*, indeed, on the very *person* of the neighbor. Many biblical scholars believe that even command eight, "Thou shalt not steal," refers in the first instance to the crime of kidnapping (cf. Ex. 21:16), a sin against the *person* of the neighbor rather than simply against his *property*. The seriousness of these crimes against the person (murder, adultery, kidnapping, bearing false witness) is underscored by the fact that Old Testament law decreed the death penalty against them.

Jesus summarized the second table of the decalogue positively: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Negatively spoken, it simply would be, "Don't hurt your neighbor." Suddenly a new and more penetrating light shines on the command, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." Here is a prohibition, not just against lies, but against even using the truth in such a way as to hurt our neighbor. Whatever we do or say should be *for* our neighbor, not *against*. And from the perspective of Scripture, the most horrifying sin would be to use truth to gain unjust personal advantage at the cost of our neighbor.

In that connection, a revealing commentary on the ninth command is provided in Deuteronomy 19:15-21, a passage spelling out with painful clarity the penalty for bearing false witness: "Then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother" (Deut. 19:19, RSV).

Here is an important clue that could guide the key actors in our stories. Pastor Martin should imagine himself in the place of Louise, and indeed, in the place of Louise's angry father. John Wilcox should put himself in the shoes of a prospective car buyer. Debbie should imagine herself in Carmen's place.

Now let them hear the command: "Thou shalt not hurt thy neighbor." And now let them act accordingly, doing or saying nothing that would hurt another to their own advantage.

For John Wilcox, the answer is straightforward: the truth will be momentarily costly to him personally, but his responsibility to God and his neighbor is clear. His is not an "intellectual" difficulty, but the "practical" problem of struggling with human selfishness. And



that is precisely the point of the command and also where we stumble most often. It is a sobering commentary on human existence that clear-cut circumstances are often the ones which most easily tempt us to sin.

Turning to Debbie and Carmen, we find a story that illustrates the potential of using the "truth" against a neighbor. Debbie could easily destroy Carmen with a blunt rendition of the facts. But not to tell the truth could leave a struggling human being to make the same mistakes again and again. For Debbie to know how much to tell – and when – demands a double portion of God's grace.

If we tell the truth with evil intent and acid tongue, and thereby destroy a person, we most certainly have broken the ninth command, even though we are "telling the truth." Invoking the penalty clause from Deuteronomy 19:19 clarifies our thinking marvelously: Are we ready for others to treat us as we have treated them?

Of our three stories, the one involving Pastor Martin is the most difficult one. I know of no easy answers for him. Yet faithful Christians constantly face such situations in this sin-twisted world. Where do they go for an answer?

Typically, Christians have appealed to the story of Rahab, the town prostitute in Jericho who provided cover for the Israelite spies (see Joshua 2). But Rahab was a Canaanite and a prostitute. Is she a reliable witness and example?

There are other examples in Scripture which reveal how God's people have sought to fulfill the spirit of the ninth command in the face of difficult circumstances: the story of the prophet Samuel when he was threatened by King Saul (1 Sam. 16:1-3); the story of the royal counselor Hushai when David's son Absalom attempted to take over the kingdom by force (2 Sam. 15-18); even the story of Elisha's playful trick on the Syrian army which resulted in a free banquet for all (2 Kings 6:11-23). These examples can provide guidance for us. But in all circumstances, we must allow the key summary statements from Scripture to reverberate through our minds: Love your neighbor as yourself; treat him as you would want to be treated. In short, don't hurt your neighbor.

But as we seek to be responsible Christians in the face of difficult circumstances, let us be clear about the risks. While it may be *right* to withhold the truth for the purpose of saving innocent lives (or even to throw a surprise party as Elisha did!), a great danger lurks therein. Telling the truth is habit-forming. So is telling lies. In God's new kingdom there will be only truth and full disclosure – always. I want neighbors of integrity, ones I can trust. Don't you?

And that is precisely the problem in this sinful world, for, with our twisted minds, we may whittle away the principle of truth until nothing remains. Light and darkness blend into a hazy twilight and we no longer are capable of telling right from wrong. That is why it is so important to make it a habit of telling the truth.

Langdon Gilkey, in his insightful commentary on a World War II Asian internment camp [*Shantung Compound*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966, pp. 145-47], describes a tragic case where a father proudly touted his son's ability to work the blackmarket with the Chinese farmers outside the camp. Blackmarketing was forbidden by the captors, but was deemed acceptable by the captives. To the father's horror, however, he discovered one day that his boy had lost the ability to tell the difference between captors and captives. He no longer told the truth to anyone. Something insidious begins to happen when we shade the truth, even for good cause, and no one knows where it will end.

So in our dilemmas we must constantly seek God's guidance. And Jesus' summary statements of the law can help us keep first things first. Indeed, stating the ninth command as "Thou shalt not hurt thy neighbor," is in keeping with the context of the decalogue and the Old Testament and in harmony with the spirit of the law as expressed by Jesus.

And in that very connection, let's return to Pastor Martin, John Wilcox, and Debbie. What counsel do we have for them in light of a command which reads: "Thou shalt not hurt thy neighbor"?

Pastor Martin, we have no clear counsel for you. Whatever you say could be catastrophic. May your relationship with God and your understanding of his word be your guide in that terrible moment when you must say something. And may God grant you grace to love your neighbor as yourself – both innocent Louise and her violent father.

John Wilcox, put yourself in your neighbor's shoes. Sell the car if you must, but don't do anything that would hurt your neighbor.

Debbie, you know the frustrations you have had with Carmen over the months. On the one hand, you could be mightily tempted right now to tell the "truth" in a such a way as to destroy her. On the other hand, you could avoid the problem and pass her by with a superficial greeting. But that would not give her the help she needs. Quick, pleasant words now could hurt her in the end. So love her as you would want to be loved. Jesus would like that.

Thou shalt not hurt thy neighbor – with lies or with the truth. That's the way it is in God's kingdom. Deep inside, we all know that is the way it should be.

**Theme: What You Get Is Not What You See**

**Leading Question:** Proverbs 14:12 declares: “There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.” How can the believer tell when what appears to be right is actually wrong?

In the widely-varying proverbs found in Proverbs 14 – 15, our focus will be on two themes: kindness and patience. And again it is worth asking the question whether the truth of these proverbs would be recognized by believers and non-believers alike. With reference to both of these traits, it could be asked where the limits and boundaries of kindness and patience should be placed. Should one always be kind? Should one be patient forever? Here are the proverbs:

**Kindness:**

14:21 It is a sin to despise one’s neighbor,  
but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy.

14:31 Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,  
but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.

**Note:** The emphasis here is on kindness to the needy. But what about kindness in a more general way? Should one also be kind to that much-maligned group in Proverbs, the wicked?

**Patience:**

14:29 Whoever is patient has great understanding,  
but one who is quick-tempered displays folly.

15:18 A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict,  
but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.

Would it be possible to reclaim some of the wicked through patience?

**Theme: Dealing with Fights**

**Leading Question:** Does Proverbs help us understand whether and when there might be times when one should actually pick a fight?

**Fighting is not good (mere descriptions):** In Proverbs 17 - 19, some of the Proverbs simply describe the negative results of fighting without giving any “wisdom” on how to stop it:

17:1 Better a dry crust with peace and quiet  
than a house full of feasting, with strife.

19:13 A foolish child is a father’s ruin,  
and a quarrelsome wife is like  
the constant dripping of a leaky roof.

**Conciliation:** Each of the following proverbs suggests at least a partial solution to conflict. Can one adopt these methods by a simple act of the will?

**1. Love is willing to overlook an offense.**

**2. Sharing information about a fight with a third party (gossip) is not helpful.**

17:9 Whoever would foster love covers over an offense,  
but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.

**3. In spite of a fight, a friend continues to love.**

**4. The worse the condition, the stronger the commitment from a friend/brother.**

17:17 A friend loves at all times,  
and a brother is born for a time of adversity

**5. Silence may be a great asset.**

**6. Multiplying words often makes matters worse**

17:28 Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent,  
and discerning if they hold their tongues.

**7. A formal mediator can sometimes negotiate a solution that is helpful to both sides.**

18:18 Casting the lot settles disputes  
and keeps strong opponents apart.

**8. Patience and a simple willingness to shrug can often reduce tensions. (See #1)**

19:3 A person’s wisdom yields patience;  
it is to one’s glory to overlook an offense.

**Avoiding the way of fools.** In a backward sort of way, descriptions of fools can also be helpful in resolving conflicts by showing how *not* to go about it:

**1. An admonition or rebuke may not be helpful to those who reveal themselves to be fools.**

17:10 A rebuke impresses a discerning person  
more than a hundred lashes a fool.

**2. Revenge is simply not helpful in resolving disputes**

17:13 Evil will never leave the house  
of one who pays back evil for good.

**3. Just drop a potentially troublesome topic. Note:** Knowing something about a person can often help us identify those matters in advance.

17:14 Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam;  
so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.

**4. When selfishness motivates a person's behavior, sound judgment is never the result.**

18:1 An unfriendly person pursues selfish ends  
and against all sound judgment starts quarrels.

**5. Listening should always precede speaking.**

18:13 To answer before listening—  
that is folly and shame.

**Confronting evil:** Some proverbs suggest that corporal punishment is sometimes the only solution. Two factors militate against such action in our day: 1) Modern legal restrictions against corporal punishment; 2) the teachings of Jesus. Here is the proverb, followed by Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount. Are there situations where Jesus' words might be overruled?

**Proverbs 19:29** Penalties are prepared for mockers,  
and beatings for the backs of fools.

**Matthew 5:38** "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

**Theme: Words of Wisdom**

**Leading Question:** What can be done to cure laziness?

Proverbs has lots to say about the lazy person – the NIV prefers the more colorful term “sluggard.” The following proverbs all have a bearing on the problem and suggest certain principles that might turn the sluggard from his unproductive ways:

**1. Within certain limits – perhaps for the sake of family members – a potential cure for laziness is to discover that if one does not work, one does not eat.** Paul gives that counsel in 2 Thess. 3:10 (NIV): “For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.’”

20:4 Sluggards do not plow in season;  
so at harvest time they look but find nothing.

**2. Sleeping when one should be working leads to poverty.**

20:13 Do not love sleep or you will grow poor;  
stay awake and you will have food to spare.

**3. Party people often pay a steep price.**

21:17 Whoever loves pleasure will become poor;  
whoever loves wine and olive oil will never be rich.

**Note:** An unhappy backspin to the truth of this “party” proverb is identified by John Wesley:

“I fear, wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches. How then is it possible that Methodism, that is, a religion of the heart, though it flourishes now as a green bay tree, should continue in this state? For the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently they increase in goods. Hence they proportionately increase in pride, in anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away. Is there no way to prevent this – this continual decay of pure religion? We ought not to prevent people from being diligent and frugal; we must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich.” – John Wesley, cited by Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Scribner edition (1958), p. 175, citing Southey, *Life of Wesley*, ch. xxix (second American edition, II, p. 308).

A related sadness is described by Maya Angelou as she reflected on the influence of wealth in the lives of former slaves and their offspring:

“People whose history and future were threatened each day by extinction considered that it was only by divine intervention that they were able to live at all. I find it interesting that the meanest life, the poorest existence, is attributed to God’s will, but as human beings become more affluent, as their living standard and style begin to ascend the material scale, God descends the scale of responsibility at a commensurate speed.” – Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Bantam Books, 1971), p. 101.

In short, hard work could destroy other moral values that are important in the life of a believer.

**4. Hard work can often be linked with generosity.** In a strange sort of way, those who are hard-working and honest can also give freely to others. In other words, they have more than enough to give away. By contrast the sluggard is constantly craving for more but never even has enough for himself.

21:25 The craving of a sluggard will be the death of him,  
because his hands refuse to work.

26 All day long he craves for more,  
but the righteous give without sparing.

**5. One doesn’t need a good excuse not to work, any silly excuse will do:**

22:13 The sluggard says, “There’s a lion outside!  
I’ll be killed in the public square!”

**Corporal Punishment:** Last week, this study guide cited Proverbs 19:29 as affirming the value of corporal punishment. If your Sabbath School class did not discuss topic in connection with the change of circumstances relative to corporal punishment, here is another opportunity. First, the pertinent proverbs from Proverbs 20 - 22, then the discussion from last week’s study guide is simply reproduced below:

**Proverbs on corporal punishment from Proverbs 20-22:**

20:30 Blows and wounds scrub away evil,  
and beatings purge the inmost being.

22:15 Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,  
but the rod of discipline will drive it far away.

**Proverbs 19:29 and the comments from last week’s study guide:**

Some proverbs suggest that corporal punishment is sometimes the only solution. In our day, two factors militate against such action: 1) Modern legal restrictions against corporal punishment; 2) the teachings of Jesus. Here is the proverb, followed by Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount. Are there situations where Jesus’ words might be overruled?

**Proverbs 19:29** Penalties are prepared for mockers,  
and beatings for the backs of fools.

**Matthew 5:38** “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

**Question:** In the last verse of 1 Corinthians 4, Paul suggested that the heavy hand might have some value: “What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness? (1 Cor. 4:21, NRSV).

**Comment:** In my teaching, I often refer to 1 Corinthians 4:21 as holding the clue to all of Scripture: God will use both the heavy and the gentle hand to bring about his kingdom. When a student is falling behind in required course work, I often approach them quietly and ask: “What do you prefer: the rod, or love in the spirit of gentleness?” My very rough estimate is that about 70% assure me that they don’t want the rod, but about 30% do admit that they need it: “Bring it on, Thompson; I need the stick.” More recently one of our theology seniors quipped: “Probably half of those who say they don’t want the stick probably need it anyway!” I suspect he is right.

Thus, in our use of the book of Proverbs, we have a wide selection of “examples” to meet a host of different needs. The complexity of the task should be a call to prayer that we may perceive the will of the Lord. Without that spirit of prayer, deeply religious people will be in great danger of not doing God’s will. This sobering quotation from Ellen White is worth noting – and I would note in advance that I believe it applies only to those who claim to be acting for God:

Those who do not learn every day in the school of Christ, who do not spend much time in earnest prayer, are not fit to handle the work of God in any of its branches, for if they do, human depravity will surely overcome them and they will lift up their souls unto vanity. – *Testimonies to Ministers*, 169



**Theme: Words of Truth**

**Leading Question:** “How can we determine when other faith communities or even secular communities, maintain truths that we should support?”

At the heart of this week’s discussion is a piece of wisdom literature with roots in Egypt. Known as the “Teaching of Amenemope” (also as the “Wisdom of Amenemope”) the text was published in 1923 by Wallis Budge, and sparked a lively debate over the relationship between the “Teaching” and the biblical book of Proverbs. Proverbs 22:20 refers to “thirty sayings” (NIV), which finds almost an exact parallel in Amenemope. Derek Kidner, in his commentary on Proverbs in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series states: “The points of contact between the two are too many and too close to be a matter of coincidence” (Kidner, 23). Kidner’s further comment on the course of the debate is also helpful:

The fact that Amenemope in these shared sayings sometimes rises to heights that are worthier of an Israelite and a Christian than of a polytheist and a seeker of tranquillity, creates an initial presumption that he is the borrower. Close scrutiny of the wording and contexts of the parallels, however, has led almost all scholars to the opposite conclusion, since it is the Hebrew text that tends to be clarified when it is read by the side of its longer Egyptian counterpart. – Kidner, *ibid*.

Now the argument has been virtually clinched by physical evidence from Cairo Museum, an ostrakon (an inscribed piece of broken pottery) from Cairo Museum containing an extract from Amenemope. That ostrakon has been dated with some certainty to 1300 BC or thereabouts, several hundred years before Solomon’s time. This was and is a potentially troubling discovery for many because of the deeply-rooted impulse to see biblical material as being original, untouched by human hands. Others can borrow from the Bible. But it’s not supposed to happen the other way around. It has been hard to believe that inspired writers would borrow from non-inspired sources. Below are comments from the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol 3, published in 1954. F. D. Nichol was the editor, but no authors are named for the various books. The SDABC argues that the whole book was written by Solomon. By contrast, this study guide is based on the assumption – supported by a certain amount of evidence – that the book is a compilation of compilations, with many but not all the proverbs written by Solomon. Note how the SDABC handled the question in 1954:

“That Solomon was the author of the book seems evident from chs. 1:1; 10:1; 25:1. See, however, on chs. 30:1; 31:1. It is also known that Solomon ‘spake three thousand proverbs’ (1 Kings 4:32). Until recently the authorship or divine authority was scarcely disputed in either the Jewish or Christian church. Modern scholarship tends to assign a postexilic date to the book and denies the Solomonic authorship of the book.” – p. 945

**On 30:1:** “Some Jewish interpreters believe that ‘Agur’ was an allegorical name for Solomon.... Those who do not consider Solomon the author of this section reason that it has a somewhat lower tone than the preceding portions of the book.... However, it is not necessary that we know through whom these inspired words were given.” – p. 1049f

**On 31:1:** “This chapter is closer in style and spirit to the rest of the book of Proverbs than is ch. 30, and there are those who think that Solomon wrote it. They regard Lemuel as another name for Solomon.” – p. 1052.

**Additional Note on Chapter 22:** “In 1922 the scholarly world learned through a preliminary announcement that another Egyptian work of wisdom literature had been discovered.... That there are a number of close parallels is evident, but this does not prove the direction of dependency.... [evidence surveyed] This leads to the conclusion that the proverbs of Amenemope.... are at least 150 years younger than those of Solomon.... Only scholars who do not accept the Solomonic authorship of the Biblical book of Proverbs, holding that it originated several centuries after Solomon’s time, can argue for a priority of Amenemope. Students of the Bible, however, who accept the Solomonic authorship of Proverbs, explain the parallels between this book and that of Amenemope by assuming that some of Solomon’s proverbs found their way to Egypt, and were used by Amenemope in his collection of proverbs, where they are now found in an Egyptian garb.  
– p. 1022

In what follows, some of the closest parallels between Proverbs and Amenemope are noted. These all come from 22:17-23:14.

### **Common Truths:**

#### **Helping the Poor:**

22:22 Do not exploit the poor because they are poor  
and do not crush the needy in court,  
23 for the Lord will take up their case  
and will exact life for life.

#### **Dealings with the ill-bred (the angry and fools):**

22:24 Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person,  
do not associate with one easily angered,  
25 or you may learn their ways  
and get yourself ensnared.

23:9 Do not speak to fools,  
for they will scorn your prudent words.

**Security: cf. 6:1-6, 11:15; 17:18, the prohibition against being security** (see lesson #3 above)

22:26 Do not be one who shakes hands in pledge

or puts up security for debts;

27 if you lack the means to pay,

your very bed will be snatched from under you.

**Comment:** If one can make peace with the idea that God's writers don't have to be first with the truth, then one doesn't have to live in fear that someone might find an ostrakon in a museum somewhere that will destroy the credibility of the Bible. The Spirit will lead God's writers to borrow anything from anywhere in order to get God's message through.

**Theme: Behind the Mask**

**Leading Question:** “What is the danger of thinking too highly of oneself?”

The first verse of this section of Proverbs (25:1) indicates that this is a *another* collection of Solomonic proverbs that was put together in the time of Hezekiah, some 250 years after the time of Solomon. For reasons that we cannot fully know, a surge of interest in Solomonic proverbs apparently led to a searching of the archives by the men of Hezekiah. The results of their search appear in Proverbs 25-29. These five chapters are some of the more “secular” ones in Proverbs. Chapter 25 yields two references to the divine, chapters 28 and 29 give us three each. But chapters 26 and 27 contain no explicit references to the divine at all.

The focus of our discussion this week is on the dangers of arrogance and pride, and about the great value of humility. And again we must raise the question of whether or not these traits are only valued by religious people. I am reminded of the headline on the cover of a *Newsweek* magazine from a number of years ago when upscale men’s attire was just coming into vogue. The cover pictured a well-clad male with all the trimmings, but with this headline: “You’re so vain!” And that comment came in the secular press! One could draw a parallel with Matthew 6:1, rendered in the CEV as: “When you do good deeds, don’t try to show off. If you do, you won’t get a reward from your Father in heaven.” One doesn’t need a prophet, priest, apostle, or Jesus to know that “truth.” No one likes an arrogant person. We all like someone who is self-confident,, but without that a self-confidence that shades into arrogance. And that is our challenge. [Remarkably, we don’t always seem to use the same measurement for everyone!]

But now let’s look at what Proverbs 25 - 27 has to say about self-pretension, pride, honesty, flattery, and humility – along with a string of proverbs that simply talk about the fool.

**Self-pretension and honesty.** C. S. Lewis comments perceptively about the dangers of self-praise. In *Surprised by Joy* (1955), the story of his own pilgrimage to faith, he writes: “The moment good taste knows itself, some of its goodness is lost” (Fontana Books, p. 86 = vii.3).

25:6 Do not exalt yourself in the king’s presence,  
and do not claim a place among his great men;  
7 it is better for him to say to you, “Come up here,”  
than for him to humiliate you before his nobles.

26:4 Do not answer a fool according to his folly,  
or you yourself will be just like him.  
5 Answer a fool according to his folly,  
or he will be wise in his own eyes.

**Comment:** These two proverbs, contradictory and side by side, provide a marvelous example of the need of spiritual discernment before attempting to apply the passages of Scripture to a particular person or a situation. Two crucial questions emerge: 1) Is this person a fool? 2) Do I speak up or shut up?

When I finally came to the place where I saw the Bible as a collection of examples or cases, most of which have to be applied by a human being under God's guidance, the end result was a transformed devotional life. Rather than see my devotions in check-list form, it dawned on me that the Bible does not apply itself; and I must seek God's guidance constantly in order to do his will. I have attached a chapter from my book, *Beyond Common Ground: Why Liberals and Conservatives Need Each Other* (Pacific Press, 2009) that develops this application more fully. In short, my devotional life now consists of three conversation partners, none of which quarrel with each other anymore: 1) The Bible which provides the cases – but does not tell me which cases to apply; 2) My reason, the only part of my body that can evaluate the cases and know which ones to apply. Yet I know that my reason is crooked and perverse, which points to the third partner: 3) Holy Spirit invited by prayer to direct and purify my reason. This is not just petitionary prayer, it is indeed purifying prayer, the only way I know to come even half-way close to following God's will.

#### **More proverbs on self-pretension and honesty:**

26:12 Do you see a person wise in their own eyes?  
There is more hope for a fool than for them.

26:24 Enemies disguise themselves with their lips,  
but in their hearts they harbor deceit.

25 Though their speech is charming, do not believe them,  
for seven abominations fill their hearts.

26 Their malice may be concealed by deception,  
but their wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.

27:2 Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth;  
an outsider, and not your own lips.

#### **Pride and Humility:**

26:1 Like snow in summer or rain in harvest,  
honor is not fitting for a fool.

#### **Fools:**

26:6 Sending a message by the hands of a fool  
is like cutting off one's feet or drinking poison.

7 Like the useless legs of one who is lame

- is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.
- 8 Like tying a stone in a sling  
is the giving of honor to a fool.
- 9 Like a thornbush in a drunkard's hand  
is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.
- 10 Like an archer who wounds at random  
is one who hires a fool or any passer-by.
- 11 As a dog returns to its vomit,  
so fools repeat their folly.

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*Beyond Common Ground* (PPPA 2009)  
Part II, Chapter 8 (pp. 80-88)  
**The Devotional Life**

**The Point:** Diversity makes prayer more crucial but less visible.

**Jesus says:** “Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” – Sermon on the Mount – Matt. 6:5-6, NRSV

**Jesus says:** “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” – Sermon on the Mount – Matt. 6:7-8, NRSV

**The Bible says:** “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” – Mark on Jesus’ prayer life – Mark 1:35, NRSV

**She says:** “Those who do not learn every day in the school of Christ, who do not spend much time in earnest prayer, are not fit to handle the work of God in any of its branches, for if they do, human depravity will surely overcome them and they will lift up their souls unto vanity.” – TM 169 (1892).

**She says:** “When men cease to depend upon men, when they make God their efficiency, then there will be more confidence manifested in one another. Our faith in God is altogether too feeble and our confidence in one another altogether too meager.” – TM 214 (1895).

**They say:** “I am certainly unfit to advise anyone else on the devotional life. My own rules are (1) To make sure that, wherever else they may be placed, the main prayers should *not* be put ‘last thing at night.’ (2) To avoid introspection in prayers – I mean not to watch one’s own mind to see if it is in the right frame, but always to turn the attention outwards to God. (3) Never, never to try to generate an emotion by will power. (4) To pray without words when I am able, but to fall back on words when tired or otherwise below par. With renewed thanks. Perhaps *you* will sometimes pray for *me*?”– C. S. Lewis to Mrs. Ursula Roberts, 31 July 1954, in *Letters of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 256.

This is an awkward chapter for me. The topic of prayer sets off several warning bells in my head. First, in at least two places, the Gospels warn of the dangers of advertising our prayer life. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus bluntly advises a private prayer life behind closed doors (Matt. 6:5-6). And Jesus’ story of the Pharisee and the publican is hardly a ringing call to convene a prayer conference (Luke 18:9-14).

I have always been intrigued by the fact that the Gospels tell us almost nothing about Jesus’ own prayer life. Mark tells us that Jesus got up very early, went to a private place and prayed. But Mark doesn’t tell us anything about what actually happened when Jesus prayed. When the disciples asked Jesus to help them with their praying, “as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1-4), our Greek New Testament puts Jesus’ answer into a 39-word prayer. That’s all, hardly the stuff to take you through a full night of prayer. The similar prayer in the Sermon on the Mount is a bit longer: 57 words plus the later addition of the 15-word doxology.

Coming down to my own day, I remember the wry comment of Gordon Balharrie, Dean of the School of Theology when I enrolled at Walla Walla College as a first-year theology student. “Young theology students are sorely tempted to preach their first sermon on the topic of prayer,” he said. “Don’t do it. You don’t know enough about the topic to preach on it.”

Finally, I remember the comments of two devout young women who attended a prayer conference led by a well-known Evangelical. In the course of the conference the leader presumed to specify how much time one “should” spend in prayer each day. “I was making good progress in my prayer life – until I went to the conference,” one of girls told me. “The conference put my prayer life into reverse!”

All that almost adds up to a convincing argument *against* saying anything about prayer!

But not quite. In fear and trembling, I do want to share a few insights that I have found beneficial, ones that are directly connected with my discovery of the diversity in Scripture and in the church. To be quite candid, in my earlier years, my devotional life had been quite ordinary. I had been following the basic plan popularized by a number of speakers and writers, but linked most prominently in my memory with the name of Morris Venden. In short, I followed the Big Three of the devotional life: pray, study, and share.

The plan is a solid one. My problem was that for me it had been mostly external, a check list rather than an internalized process. Pray? Check. Study? Check. Share? – the toughest one... Check. I imagined God to be something like a giant Scout master with a chart. If I could tick off my Big Three for the day, God would be pleased and I could get on with life. I didn’t want to admit it, but with that kind of external check-list approach I could miss my devotions and not

even miss them. It was embarrassing, troubling, discouraging.

But when I began to realize the significance of the diversity in Scripture – matching the diversity in the church – a transformation was underway. I will simply lay out my conclusions under the heading of the three “conversation partners.”

### **Three Conversation Partners: Scripture, Reason, Holy Spirit**

In my more traditional approach to prayer, my conversation partners in prayer found it easy to quarrel with each other, and for two reasons. First, if my reason told me that a particular passage of Scripture didn’t apply to me, I felt guilty for rejecting the “authority” of Scripture in favor of my own reason. Second, I had been programmed as a child – probably as an adult, too – to turn to prayer as a last resort. Lost keys, for example? Turn the house upside down – exhausting all merely *human* resources – then pray. That’s prayer as a last resort.

The new plan is revolutionary, peace loving. My conversation partners never quarrel anymore. Each has a clear-cut task to bring to the table and we work it through. It’s a wonderful plan. Let me explain.

**1. Scripture.** Once I was able to say out loud that Scripture is more like a casebook than a codebook, then I could be perfectly honest with what Scripture can and cannot do. What came clear to me is the difference between a visit from a live prophet and a visit to the written record of the prophet’s work in Scripture. A great gulf is fixed between the two. If a prophet were to confront me, for example, as Nathan did David with his bony finger and an announcement – “You are the man!” [See 2 Sam. 12:7, after David’s sin with Bathsheba.] – how could I possibly claim that the prophetic message did not apply to me but should simply be added to the casebook? To quote an Old Testament exclamation: Such a thing is not done in Israel!

But when the confrontation is over and all we have is the written record, then the event does indeed simply become part of an expanded casebook. In David’s case, of course, his guilt was clearly evident. There’s absolutely no question about that. But where the casebook would come in – for Nathan, for example – is the question of how to deal with David. Heavy hand or gentle? Sermon, story, or straight rebuke? In our day, the question might revolve around email, voice mail, regular mail, or a personal visit. Which one and when? From among the cases open to him, Nathan chose to open with a parable of the rich man who stole the poor man’s sheep.

So, to be perfectly blunt, Scripture can never tell me exactly what I should teach my students. The “cases” in Scripture can inform questions of content as well as questions of when and how. But nowhere in Scripture can I find a clear “Thus saith the Lord” to guide me in all my decisions day by day. Nor will Scripture tell me what I should include in this book. It provides me with a host of examples. But the decisions do not simply jump from my Bible into the manuscript. And that brings me to the next conversation partner, Reason.

**2. Reason.** Several thoughtful voices have suggested that my approach to Scripture exalts reason over revelation. That is a serious matter, to be sure. But if Scripture does not “self-apply” in my daily life (as noted above), just how are applications made? The hard truth is that my head (or heart – I use the terms almost interchangeably) is the only part of my body suitable to the task. I cannot use my elbow, my chin, or my knee. I have to use my head.

But one of the “truths” that is abundantly clear in a host of passages throughout Scripture – could I say a host of “cases”? – is that my reason (heart) is suspect, seriously suspect. “The



heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” exclaims Jeremiah (Jer. 17:9, KJV). The NRSV says it is “devious” and “perverse.”

So what does one do with a deceitful, devious, wicked, and perverse heart?

Our only choice is to bring it to God, and plead, as David did, for cleansing and renewal. In Psalm 51, for example, the cries rise heavenward again and again: “Wash me.” “Cleanse me.” “Purge me.” “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:2, 7, 10).

My head, my heart, is the only part of me capable of evaluating and applying the cases I find in Scripture. Yet my heart is thoroughly incapable unless I come to God in brokenness and humility. The bitter truth of that necessity is vividly portrayed in these lines from W. H. Auden:

O stand, stand at the window  
As the tears scald and start;  
You must love your crooked neighbor  
With your crooked heart.

– W. H. Auden, *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden*, via Roger Robbennolt in *Carnival Tales for Blind Ben See* (Leavenworth, KS: Forest of Peace Publishing, 1999), 111, 161.

A crooked heart is all I have. So I come to God for cleansing, for healing. Unless I do, I am in great danger of twisting Scripture, misusing it in my life and in the life of others, wreaking havoc wherever I might turn and greatly dishonoring my Savior. God’s spirit is quite capable of working through good people who do not even know him. [Paul suggests this kind of work by the Spirit in Romans 2:14 when he refers to “Gentiles, who do not possess the law,” yet who “do instinctively what the law requires.” That passage seems to lie behind Ellen White’s comment in connection with the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25: “Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God” (DA 638).] But for those of us who claim to know him and claim to be acting on his behalf, the expectations are infinitely higher.

These stinging words from Ellen White are ones that I rarely share and for several reasons which you might surmise. But this is where they fit: “Those who do not learn every day in the school of Christ,” she says, “who do not spend much time in earnest prayer, are not fit to handle the work of God in any of its branches, for if they do, human depravity will surely overcome them and they will lift up their souls unto vanity” (TM 169 [1892]).

And so we come to the third conversation partner, the Holy Spirit.

**3. Holy Spirit, invited through prayer.** The role of this third conversation partner is so easily misunderstood because of our tendency to use prayer as a last resort. After exhausting all human resources, we pray. I don’t want to diminish the value of urgent and even last-minute cries to God. They are thoroughly biblical and entirely appropriate in their place. But “emergency” prayer is not the same as “purifying” prayer, a concept that comes much closer to what I have in mind. Let me explain.

The purpose of bringing my crooked heart to God for cleansing or purification is so that my head (heart) might be in a better position to perceive God’s will in Scripture. Purifying prayer

enables my mind, my reason, to fulfill its proper role in the three-cornered conversation. A purified heart is the only kind that has a half a chance of understanding and applying Scripture in accordance with God's will. In emergency prayer, I usually throw up my hands and turn everything over to God, dropping out of the conversation completely. The "emergency prayer" approach might suggest that I simply open my Bible at random and expect the Spirit to let my finger fall on the right verse.

I suspect that purifying prayer is what Paul had in mind when he admonished the Thessalonian believers to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). When we are in a constant attitude of prayer we will be in a much better position to represent God's character and will in our decisions. When it comes to our study of Scripture, "praying without ceasing" means that we will be using our heads more, thinking more, not less. Because we are in an attitude of prayer, God can guide our minds and hearts into proper attitudes and good applications.

In my conversations with other Christians I am constantly on the lookout for good metaphors to illustrate how prayer works in our lives. One friend suggested that we are like a radio playing God's signal. I complained that a radio was too passive a model. Another friend suggested a control tower at an airport. That one works better, for it requires the "presence" of Someone in the tower, but also active decisions on the part of the pilot.

The metaphor I find most useful, however, is the Brita water filter or any kind of chemical filter across a moving stream. The idea of a water filter illustrates the difference between the life that is rooted in prayer and one that is not, for when we are not in communion with God, life goes on. We eat, sleep, talk, work, and play, regardless of whether we are in communion with God. But like the water flowing through a saturated filter that no longer filters, the life untouched by prayer keeps flowing; it simply is not purified by contact with the divine.

There is one other very "rational" part of this approach to prayer that I discovered when our two girls were young. On those relatively rare occasions when parental direction seemed necessary, I found myself saying, "Ask Jesus to help you." Then I began wondering what I was expecting Jesus to do. Would he come with a giant 20cc syringe and inject some help?

I concluded that what would be most helpful for them – and for me, too, when I needed special help – was to ask for help and to *remember* asking for help. Somehow it is much more difficult to be nasty when I am actively praying for the other person's good and *remembering* that I have prayed for that person's good.

That same procedure applies when I come to Scripture with my crooked heart. If I can consistently remember that I am doing God's work instead of my own, I will be using my mind, my heart, my reason, all the more, but under the purifying influence of God's Spirit.

Does such an approach guarantee right answers? Not at all. Indeed, when Ellen White was counseling a brother to "educate" himself so that he would have "wisdom to deal with minds," she concludes her counsel on a cautionary note: "Our heavenly Father frequently leaves us in uncertainty in regard to our efforts" (3T 420 [1875]).

## **The Results**

To my grateful amazement, my devotional life has been greatly enriched by my knowledge of the diversity in Scripture and in the church. Instead of an external checklist, I now know that study and prayer is intrinsic to the life of the Christian. Only through study and prayer will I be

able to address the needs that I will meet during the day. Every student, every class, is a call to prayer, a fresh situation that must be brought before the Lord. Devotions are no longer a chore. I rejoice that I have the privilege of being in touch with God as I seek to be his faithful witness.

It is also a joy to know that I don't have to feel guilty about deciding which part of Scripture is appropriate for any particular person or situation. Nor do I have to "let go and let God" (whatever that might mean...). Instead of letting go, I hang on all the tighter, knowing that God expects me to be faithful in my witness for him.

To sum up, the Bible provides the cases, but never tells me what case I should use in any particular situation. My heart and mind must process the cases in order to make the proper application. But my crooked heart must constantly be brought in touch with God through prayer so that this deceitful chunk of humanity can be purified in God's presence.

After I have done my homework, then I am ready to join my brothers and sisters to ponder the work of the church. If we have each done our personal work, then we will come together as the early Christians did in Acts 15. We will make important decisions when "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28).

**Theme: Living by Faith**

**Leading Question:** If one wants to be a law-abiding citizen, does Proverbs make it perfectly clear how to do that?

The quick answer to that leading question is no – yet Proverbs does make it clear that we can have peace with God, though the answer doesn't always sound much like the New Testament.

The “official” title for this lesson is a curious one. If one were to read through the entire book of Proverbs, one would hardly be tempted, I should think, to say that “living by faith” would come to mind as a dominant theme. I can only surmise that the Sabbath School people wanted to make sure that we have a full meal in every book of the Bible, including Proverbs. But as long as we have the full Bible, we don't need to get every single doctrine in every book.

But perhaps we are all tempted to read our favorite doctrines into places where they are not self-evident. We so eagerly want all the Bible to make sense to us. And sometimes that does not come easily. Paul, for example, the great apostle of righteousness by faith, seems to take a line from Habakkuk 2:4 and move the Old Testament concept of faithfulness toward a more forensic and legal understanding in Romans 1:17: “The righteous will live by faith.” Today, even the NIV, a thoroughly evangelical translation, adopts an Old Testament perspective for Habakkuk 2:4: “The righteous person will live by his faithfulness.” Most of the translations that stay close to the KJV tradition have not been brave enough to go that far; they stay with “faith” while listing faithfulness as an option in a footnote (KJV, NKJV, RSV, ESV, NRSV).

Another interesting word that is easy to manipulate is the word *torah*. It can refer to the first section of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). In that sense, it is a counterpart of the other two sections of the Hebrew Bible, “prophets” and “writings.” But *torah* can also simply mean “instruction.” Psalm 119 is a book which celebrates this view of *torah*. It is the longest Psalm in our Bible and it praises the fact that God has shown us how to live. In short, *Torah* is simply a God-given way of life.

In evangelical circles, when one refers to Law and Gospel as counterparts, Gospel always wins out as Good News; Law sounds like an instrument of condemnation. But according to the Old Testament, Law is good news, it is Gospel! That's what the word Gospel means: Good news! You clearly get the feel for that idea in Deuteronomy 4:5-8, a passage where Moses seems to be popping his buttons with legitimate pride over the fact that God has revealed his way of life to Israel. The CEV makes the passage sing:

No other nation has laws that are as fair as the ones the Lord my God told me to give you.  
If you faithfully obey them when you enter the land, you will show other nations how

wise you are. In fact, everyone that hears about your laws will say, “That great nation certainly is wise!” And what makes us greater than other nations? We have a God who is close to us and answers our prayers. – Deut. 4:5-8, CEV

The word *torah* does not appear in this passage; synonyms are used. But the message is clear: It is good news that God has shown us how to live.

If one turns to Proverbs, one can ask questions about salvation and obedience. But the answers won’t always sound like the apostle Paul. And that’s alright. We believe in all Scripture, not just in Paul or just in Proverbs.

To start with, let’s note the memory verse selected by the official study guide. It affirms that if we have faith in God, we will be secure. It doesn’t explain how we become secure. We simply are safe in God’s hands:

**Memory Verse:** Prov. 29:25, NIV/NKJV: “The fear of man brings a snare, But whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe.”

**Law: Examples, Cases, Illustrations.** The official study guide notes that *torah* appears 13 times in Proverbs, 4 of them in Proverbs 28. Study the ones in Proverbs 28 so see if you can determine their more precise meaning. The texts here are in the NIV:

28:4 Those who forsake instruction (*torah*) praise the wicked,  
but those who heed it (*torah*) resist them.

28:7 A discerning son heeds instruction (*torah*),  
but a companion of gluttons disgraces his father.

28:9 If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction (*torah*),  
even their prayers are detestable.

29:18 Where there is no revelation (*chazon*) people cast off restraint;  
but blessed is the one who heeds wisdom’s (*torah*) instruction.

**Note:** *chazon* (in 29:18) is usually translated vision or revelation. The second line contains the word *torah* and is translated by the NIV as wisdom, in keeping with the dominant tone of Proverbs. The more literal NASB translates *torah* as “law”

29:18 (NASB) Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained,  
But happy is he who keeps the law.

**Mercy and Salvation:** Paul is usually seen as the inspired writer who focuses most intensely on forensic/legal language. There is little evidence of that perspective in Proverbs. But there are proverbs which make it clear that wisdom people can find peace and safety within God’s protecting, saving care. Here are some crucial verses from the NIV:

28:13 Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper,  
but the **one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.**  
14 **Blessed is the one who always trembles before God,**  
but whoever hardens their heart falls into trouble.

28:25 The greedy stir up conflict,  
**but those who trust in the Lord will prosper.**

**The memory verse in several versions:**

29:25 Fear of man will prove to be a snare,  
**but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.** – NIV and NKJV are identical!

29:25 Don't fall into the trap  
of being a coward—  
**trust the Lord,**  
**and you will be safe.** – CEV

29:25 The fear of human opinion disables;  
**trusting in God protects you from that.** – Message

29:25 The fear of others lays a snare,  
**but one who trusts in the Lord is secure.** NRSV

**Theme: The Humility of the Wise**

**Leading Question:** "On what basis can one claim an exalted status for oneself?"

As noted earlier (lesson #9), those who want to see the whole book of Proverbs as coming from Solomon, want to argue that Agur is simply another name for Solomon. Most scholars, even very conservative ones are now able to see it as the name of a wise man who is otherwise not known in Scripture. He could be from anywhere.

What is particularly striking about Proverbs 30 is that it features not only the most deeply religious part of Proverbs, namely, two prayers, the only prayers in the book, but also the part of Proverbs that is arguably the most secular. After the second prayer ends in 30:9, a cluster of more playful proverbs follow, bracketed by proverbs with explicit moral implications (30:10-14, 30:32-33). But after the prayer ends, no more references to God appear in the chapter.

The title of this lesson, "The Humility of the Wise," reflects a theme explored in lesson nine. In this chapter it comes out with particular force in the two prayers. Note the first one, given here in the NIV translation.

30:1 "I am weary, God,  
but I can prevail.  
2 Surely I am only a brute, not a man;  
I do not have human understanding.  
3 I have not learned wisdom,  
nor have I attained to the knowledge of the Holy One.  
4 Who has gone up to heaven and come down?  
Whose hands have gathered up the wind?  
Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak?  
Who has established all the ends of the earth?  
What is his name, and what is the name of his son?  
Surely you know!

This prayer echoes lines from Job 38. That's where Job scored zero out of eighty-four in the "examination" God gave him. Here, Agur's humility almost seems to slip into depression. But in any case, he clearly is in awe before the mysteries of God.

The second prayer is more practical, revealing the struggles of an honest man in his desires to be faithful to God. Here is the NIV translation:

30:7 “Two things I ask of you, Lord;  
do not refuse me before I die:  
8 Keep falsehood and lies far from me;  
give me neither poverty nor riches,  
but give me only my daily bread.  
9 Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you  
and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’  
Or I may become poor and steal,  
and so dishonor the name of my God.”

**Bracketing the playful proverbs.** The following proverbs, while not mentioning the divine, clearly emphasize solid, moral values. And the first section contrasts the proud with the humble. And the closing lines of the chapter also emphasize the importance of humility: Here they are in the NIV translation:

30:11 “There are those who curse their fathers  
and do not bless their mothers;  
12 those who are pure in their own eyes  
and yet are not cleansed of their filth;  
13 those whose eyes are ever so haughty,  
whose glances are so disdainful;  
14 those whose teeth are swords  
and whose jaws are set with knives  
to devour the poor from the earth  
and the needy from among mankind.

30:32 If you play the fool and exalt yourself,  
or if you plan evil,  
clap your hand over your mouth!

**The playful proverbs?** Perhaps in a subtle way, the clever observations about nature in 30:15-21 could also be seen as pointing to humility. These are playful mysteries that don’t emphasize explicitly either human greatness or the importance of humility. They simply describe the mysteries of the world. That could also be seen as an appropriate role for one who models in his life the humility of the wise. And given what the historical books tell us about Solomon, they present a tantalizing challenge in the collection of proverbs that are associated with his name.



**Theme: Women and Wine**

**Leading Question:** To what extent does the picture of the ideal wife in Proverbs 31 reinforce or undermine male chauvinism?

An ambivalent answer to the leading question is suggested at the end of this lesson. But first we must address the two key warnings at the beginning of the chapter. Our lesson title puts women before wine, even though the narrative of the noble wife dominates the chapter (31:10-31).

**The first warning: women:** Of the two threats/warnings discussed in the chapter, women are mentioned before wine (31:3). That passage is cited here in the NIV:

31:3 Do not spend your strength on women,  
your vigor on those who ruin kings.

Except for David's tragic experience with Bathsheba, the major threat that women posed to kings in the Old Testament was not adultery, but polygamy involving foreigners. That was surely Solomon's problem. In Proverbs, however, the dominant concern is not polygamy but adultery. If the book is indeed a manual of instruction for upper class young men, as most scholars would see it, then its primary target is not royalty, but young men who might be tempted by another man's wife. At the very end of the book, however, is a chapter that focuses on the threats to a king. From the perspective of the author of Nehemiah, it was the problem of foreign wives that caused the problem. Note Nehemiah's passionate verbal attack on foreign wives as he berates his fellow Jews at the close of the book that carries his name:

Nehemiah 13:26 (NIV): Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women.

**Rank of sexual sins in the Old Testament in comparison with 21<sup>st</sup> century values:** In the Old Testament, the hierarchy of sexual sins would appear to be:

1. Adultery
2. Prostitution
3. Polygamy

Of these three, only adultery was considered irredeemable. Kings were assumed to have the right to take more than one wife and for that the Patriarchs Abraham and Jacob paved the way. But foreign wives? Not good. **Question:** What would be the hierarchy of sexual sins in our culture?

**The second warning: Alcohol.** As much as teetotaling believers would like to see total abstinence as the standard in the Old Testament, it is difficult to make that case based on the examples in Scripture. Proverbs 20:1 reveals that alcohol abuse could be a problem: “Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise” (NIV). But even that does not get much press in Proverbs. Given the dangers of contaminated water, one could make the case that low-alcohol drinks might even be more healthful than water! When abstinence is mandated in the Old Testament, it is in connection with the Nazirite vow, an extreme vow that makes the health threat secondary: “As long as they remain under their Nazirite vow, they must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins” (Num. 6:4, NIV).

But in Proverbs 31, alcohol appears in the role of a narcotic pain-killer for those in trouble:

It is not for kings, Lemuel—  
it is not for kings to drink wine,  
not for rulers to crave beer,  
5 lest they drink and forget what has been decreed,  
and deprive all the oppressed of their rights.  
6 Let beer be for those who are perishing,  
wine for those who are in anguish!  
7 Let them drink and forget their poverty  
and remember their misery no more.

In terms of modern application, I tell my university students that they need every brain cell they can muster. If the temperance slogan is correct: “Brain damage starts with the first drink,” then the rule that applies to kings would certainly have an application to students! **Note:** A Google check for that “slogan” yielded a PDF article from the SDA temperance journal, *Listen*. The article cited research done by noted physiologist, Dr. Melvin Knisely. The Wikipedia entry for Knisely states: “One of the most cited Knisely works was his research which documented the fact that even one alcoholic drink kills brain cells, which are irreplaceable.”

**The Noble Wife.** The book of Proverbs concludes with strong words of praise to the noble wife. In the recording session for this lesson, Dave Thomas, dean of the School of Theology at Walla Walla University, observed that he has seen this chapter affect women in radically different ways: Some are highly motivated by it; others find it depressing and discouraging. In Sabbath School discussions it might be fruitful to read the whole passage aloud and then discuss its potential usefulness (or harm) in a modern setting. Does it help or hurt the cause of equality for women? This good wife is noted for her “wisdom” and “instruction,” but the narrative neither affirms or denies her right to teach men. Paul, of course, had stronger convictions on the matter: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man” (1 Tim. 2:12, NIV). It should also be noted here that 31:30 affirms this woman as one who fears the Lord – yet no religious activities are included in her list of good deeds. That should inform our discussions of what it means to be God-fearing in our day.

31:10 (NIV) A wife of noble character who can find?  
She is worth far more than rubies.  
11 Her husband has full confidence in her  
and lacks nothing of value.  
12 She brings him good, not harm,  
all the days of her life.  
13 She selects wool and flax  
and works with eager hands.  
14 She is like the merchant ships,  
bringing her food from afar.  
15 She gets up while it is still night;  
she provides food for her family  
and portions for her female servants.  
16 She considers a field and buys it;  
out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.  
17 She sets about her work vigorously;  
her arms are strong for her tasks.  
18 She sees that her trading is profitable,  
and her lamp does not go out at night.  
19 In her hand she holds the distaff  
and grasps the spindle with her fingers.  
20 She opens her arms to the poor  
and extends her hands to the needy.  
21 When it snows, she has no fear for her household;  
for all of them are clothed in scarlet.  
22 She makes coverings for her bed;  
she is clothed in fine linen and purple.  
23 Her husband is respected at the city gate,  
where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.  
24 She makes linen garments and sells them,  
and supplies the merchants with sashes.  
25 She is clothed with strength and dignity;  
she can laugh at the days to come.  
26 She speaks with wisdom,  
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.  
27 She watches over the affairs of her household  
and does not eat the bread of idleness.  
28 Her children arise and call her blessed;  
her husband also, and he praises her:  
29 “Many women do noble things,  
but you surpass them all.”  
30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;  
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.  
31 Honor her for all that her hands have done,  
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.