

INTRODUCTION

I absolutely devoured the book of Proverbs when I was a teenager. It was so relevant to my everyday life. It called me to purity versus immorality. It advocated diligence instead of sloth. It warned me to avoid drunkenness, debt, and wicked friends. It told me to control my temper and my tongue. As a public school kid struggling to swim upstream, I needed its practical teaching.

But then I went to college and seminary. I became spiritually sophisticated. I took Greek and theology. I kind of *outgrew* Proverbs. For many years I looked askance at the book—seeing it as a sort of “self-help” book, analogous to Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* or Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. True. Useful. But... *yawn*. Pedantic. Basic. Even a bit behavioristic. I wanted to study deep theology, not sanctimonious advice or proverbial platitudes. I wanted *meat*: justification, propitiation, and so on. You know, *serious* Christianity.

How foolish I was. How pompous. How wrong.

For starters, my thinking was an offense to the God Who inspired the book of Proverbs. Beyond that, as a new husband, father, and pastor, I needed the practical wisdom of Proverbs informing my view of business, conflict management, integrity, and virtue.

But there’s more. I was wrong to dismiss Proverbs as a self-help book—a *sanctification* book. (Sanctification? *Blech!*—I speak as a fool.) Proverbs, rightly understood, abounds with gospel truth. It details what it means to be born again, and what the life of those who have been born again looks like. It’s not merely a personal development book or an anthology of good advice. It’s ingenious. It deals with the soul’s connection to God and with the wise, skillful living that results. In short, I was being a prig—a *fool*, in Proverbs’ jargon—and I needed to repent of my gross arrogance.

Yes, Proverbs, much like James in the New Testament, deals with the rubber-meets-the-road realities of godly living. It is vastly useful regarding progressive sanctification. Self-control. Virtue. Obedience. But it’s also full of remarkable truths about regeneration—how a Christian life *begins*.

And so, I invite you to read Proverbs with me as though for the very first time. We’ve assigned daily readings that take you through the entire book in a month, and the reading won’t usually set up the day’s devotional. That’s okay. Please—*please*—take the time to look up the verses we cite throughout. We want you to have a firsthand engagement with the biblical text.

My co-laborer in this *Gospel Meditations* endeavor is Joe Tyrpak, one of the wisest people I know. Together, we’ll labor to help you understand and apply the book of Proverbs. We want to prove that Proverbs is full of gospel truth and essential to gospel living. We’ve labored to make this devotional so Jesus-saturated that it will be unlike any resource on Proverbs you’ve read. Join us in discovering—or rediscovering—the gospel-saturated genius of this astounding book.

Grace to you, my friends!

Chris Anderson

HOW TO FISH IN PROVERBS

“To understand words of insight...” (Proverbs 1:2)

Let’s start with a modern-day proverb: “Give a man a fish, and you’ll feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you’ll feed him for a lifetime.” In this devotional book, we’re going to serve you some spiritual fish for your nourishment. But we also want you to know how to fish on your own—how to read, interpret, and apply Proverbs. Here’s how to enjoy the book of Proverbs and avoid some common mistakes.

First, enjoy the book. You’re not listening to lectures in a quiet classroom. No, you’re out on field trips—on a farm, at a circus, in Times Square. We’ll visit banquet halls and anthills. Bedrooms and brothels. Palaces, markets, ships, and a rooftop. As for the characters of this book, they could fill a Dickens novel. You’ll meet a fool and a wise man. A proud father and an ashamed mother. A hen-pecked husband and a virtuous wife. A borrower and a lender. A king and a beggar. A sluggard and a self-starter. A kissing enemy and a wounding friend. A farmer, a trapper, and a used car salesman. And Proverbs is a virtual *zoo* of animals.

Wordsworth says, “We murder to dissect.” We sometimes get so analytical that we suck the very life and beauty out of Scripture. But God has given us remarkably vivid pictures in Proverbs. Savor them. Imagine them. Don’t flatten the book into a series of boring life lessons.

Second, understand the nature of Hebrew poetry. In Hebrew poetry, the ideas “rhyme.” Most proverbs consist of two lines, and the second plays off the first. Often the second line is a *restatement* of the first (3:5; 22:7). Sometimes it’s a *contrast* (10:1). Sometimes it’s *cause and effect* (3:6), or *illustration* (10:26), or *problem and solution* (12:9). Note how the two lines of a verse work together.

Third, don’t confuse the observations of pithy proverbs with air-tight promises. We’re not in Romans. The genre of Proverbs is unique. And if you don’t get that, you’ll misinterpret and misapply it. Are the proverbs collected in this book true? Absolutely! They’re inspired. But they’re true *proverbs*.

Consider another modern-day (and uninspired) proverb: “The early bird gets the worm.” The point is that those who get to work early are more likely to succeed. Usually. But sometimes the early bird gets the *cat!* (And the second mouse gets the cheese.) I’m not trying to shake your confidence in biblical proverbs. But you need to realize that they are often generalities rather than promises. For example, Proverbs 3:1-2 say that being wise brings long life. But the proverb isn’t proven false because a godly girl suffers an early death or a wicked man lives to 100. Proverbs aren’t necessarily promises.

Finally, see Christ as the ultimate Example and Source of wisdom. Solomon wrote of biblical virtues under the Holy Spirit’s inspiring influence. But Jesus personifies those virtues (Luke 24:44). No one is so wise, so self-controlled, so generous, so forgiving, so true, so kind as our Savior. Yes, this book teaches us practical how-to lessons about life. But it also reveals to us our innate foolishness—our *sin*. Rather than causing us to despair under the weight of crushing guilt, let the proverbs which convict you of sin point you to faith in Jesus Christ as your only Hope of gaining new *life* and a new *way of life* (Galatians 3:24). Remember the words of 1 Corinthians 1:30: *Christ is true wisdom*, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. So look for Jesus in Proverbs’ pages, lest you find only frustration and failure in your attempts to get your act together.

Enjoy this book. Look for parallels within most verses. Understand how proverbs work. And, as always, “remember Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:8).

Let the gospel make you thirsty to internalize (and rightly interpret) Proverbs. —Chris