

## ***Feasting on Proverbs***

A couple weeks ago some friends invited Brenda and me over for a meal. We knew it was going to be fantastic, but when we got there we quickly realized that it was a feast. Guess what we had for appetizers? Crawfish flown in from Louisiana. I had the privilege of demonstrating how to eat those pink crustaceans; I'll spare you the details. The main dish was seafood tacos which included shrimp, tuna (not from the can), tilapia, homemade Pico de Gallo and salsa. Especially decadent was the layered dessert. The top layer was blueberry pie; the middle layer was cheesecake; and the bottom layer was red velvet cake. It was all glued together with thick, rich icing.

As appropriate for a feast, we looked forward to it ahead of time, we savored it while we were there, and we talked about it after we left. Since there was so much food we even took home leftovers so we could enjoy it again the next day.

The reason I'm droning on about that feast is because of what we read in Proverbs 9 earlier: Wisdom invited us to approach the book of Proverbs like a feast (because it IS a feast)! Just like the feast Brenda and I enjoyed, I want to encourage you to approach the book of Proverbs with great anticipation ahead of time. And when you arrive take your time and savor what you find there. Then talk about it with others after you're done. And hopefully you will be nourished by the leftovers.

Of course all of Scripture is a feast. But today I want us to consider how Proverbs is a distinct type of feast. In some unique ways we will have to slow down and think carefully about what we find there. I hope today's message helps you do just that.

One of our goals for this series is to equip you to read wisdom literature with confidence. We want you to be able to go to the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job knowing the basic plot and understanding some of the principles for interpreting these books. Today's message is the last one in Proverbs. Next week Luther Eatman will be here; Luther is the pastor at Bridge of Hope in Kansas City, KS (a church we've partnered with for years). Two weeks from now we'll discuss the book of Job. And three weeks from now we'll discuss the book of Ecclesiastes.

Today as we talk about feasting on Proverbs, I want to give you 3 perspectives, 2 things to notice, and 2 things to appreciate about Proverbs. You'll find an outline on the back of your bulletin. As always, the manuscript of this sermon will be posted on our web site tomorrow morning.

***Three Perspectives.*** Three ***perspectives*** as you read Proverbs:

1. *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."* This reality - that you cannot be wise if you do not fear the Lord - has to inform the way we feast on the book of Proverbs. As we've discussed in recent weeks, the fear of the Lord involves relating to God as he really is. This means that as we come to Proverbs, we consciously need to remember that he is infinitely perfect in all his attributes AND radically for us in Christ Jesus. Since God is infinitely perfect (and we are not), we come to Proverbs humble

and teachable. And since God is radically for us (as he demonstrated on the cross), we come to Proverbs with anticipation, believing that he will teach us wisdom as we feast on Proverbs.

My strong recommendation is that just as it's good to pray and give thanks and ask for nourishment before you eat good food, stop and pray before you feast on Proverbs. "God, I praise you that you are infinitely wise and that you have recorded your wisdom in Proverbs. I come to you today seeking wisdom. Teach me through your Holy Spirit. Help me understand these proverbs. Give me a heart that's willing to obey. In Jesus' name. Amen." That prayer expresses the fear of the Lord - that you are relating to God as he really is.

2. *Some proverbs are circumstantial (not universally true)*. This perspective is a caution against taking one proverb and applying it in every circumstance. Wisdom involves discerning when one proverb applies and not another.

This is true of everyday proverbs in our culture. For example, the expression, "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth" suggests that if a gift is free, don't examine it too closely. But another proverb says, "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts." That's a reference to Greek mythology. The Greeks gave a gigantic wooden horse to the city of Troy and then pretended to sail away. The Trojans pulled the horse inside the walls of the city, unaware that the Greeks had soldiers inside. So, if you get a gift from an enemy, you *should* examine it VERY carefully. Different proverbs apply in different circumstances.

One of the best examples of this is found in Proverbs 26:4 and 26:5. These two verses, side by side, seem contradictory:

4 Answer not a fool according to his folly,  
lest you be like him yourself.  
5 Answer a fool according to his folly,  
lest he be wise in his own eyes.

So which is it, do you answer a fool according to his folly or not? There are a couple different ways to understand these verses. I think the most straightforward understanding is that you have to size up the fool in front of you and decide the probability of him accepting your correction. If you are pretty sure that the discussion will devolve to the place where you "become like him yourself" (i.e., you are just as vindictive and unreasonable as the fool), don't even answer him. But if you think there's the possibility that he will listen to you, then address his foolishness so that not "be wise in his own eyes." In Proverbs, being "wise in your own eyes" means that you trust in your own thoughts, not in the wisdom God gives (see 12:15).

Be aware that some proverbs are circumstantial. Of course, many are not circumstantial; they are always true. For example, Proverbs 18:10 tells us:

10 The name of the Lord is a strong tower;  
the righteous man runs into it and is safe.

It is always good to run to God for safety.

3. No single proverb tells you everything you need to know about a topic. This is a bit different than the previous perspective. This is a caution against reading one proverb and concluding that you know everything you need to know about a topic. Rather, you need to take into account the whole book of Proverbs and the rest of wisdom literature (Job and Ecclesiastes) and the rest of Scripture. Proverbs itself is actually rather nuanced on the subjects it addresses. And Proverbs understands that we live in a fallen world in which things don't always turn out as they should.

For example, consider what the book of Proverbs says about poverty and wealth. Proverbs 10:4 reads:

4 A slack hand causes poverty,  
but the hand of the diligent makes rich.

Generally speaking, this is true all over the world in every generation. Diligence leads to wealth and laziness leads to poverty. But if you only consider this verse, you might conclude that all poor people are lazy and all rich people are diligent. Proverbs itself tells us that that's not everything you need to know about poverty and wealth. Proverbs 13:23 tells us:

23 The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food,  
but it is swept away through injustice.

In this scenario the poor would work the ground and have plenty of food if they were allowed to do so. But because of injustice they are denied the opportunity. As well, there are the "better than" proverbs which make clear that sometimes it's not always best to be wealthy. One example is Proverbs 19:1.

1 Better is a poor person who walks in his integrity  
than one who is crooked in speech and is a fool.

This poor person walks in integrity; their poverty isn't due to laziness or any other personal weakness/sin. That poor person has a better life than one who is crooked in speech and is a fool. The implication is that the fool is rich.

The point is that we need to avoid reading one proverb and thinking we understand everything we need to know about a subject. Both Proverbs and experience demand a more nuanced approach.

**Two Things to Notice.** A couple of things to notice as you read Proverbs:

1. Notice the point of the parallelism in each verse. Parallelism is a literary device in which 2 or more lines are parallel to each other. They balance each other in some way.

When you read individual proverbs, it's good to notice the relationship between the two lines in a verse.

Let's take three examples. What is the point of the parallelism in Proverbs 3:11?

11 My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline  
or be weary of his reproof,

The two lines are synonymous; they are each saying the same thing in two slightly different ways. Don't despise or be weary of the Lord's efforts to correct you.

What is the point of the parallelism in Proverbs 10:23?

23 Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool,  
but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding.

The two lines contrast how a fool thinks about doing wrong with how a man of understanding thinks about wisdom. Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool; he laughs about it, writes songs about it, brags about it. It's a joke. Surprisingly, the second line **doesn't** say, "And a man of understanding is deadly serious about wisdom." No, wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding. That's worth thinking about - how pleasurable wisdom is.

Let's consider one more. What's the point of the parallelism in Proverbs 10:26?

26 Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,  
so is the sluggard to those who send him.

The first line gives a couple of images; and the second line likens those images to a real-life situation. Both vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes are both irritating or painful. So is "the sluggard to those who send him." If you send someone to deliver a message or fulfill a responsibility, you want it done on time and with excellence. If you send a sluggard, you will experience irritation and pain.

Noticing the point of the parallelism in each verse will help you understand its meaning.

## 2. Notice whether the proverb is descriptive or prescriptive.

A proverb is merely descriptive if it simply describes the way things **are**. A proverb is prescriptive if it prescribes the way things **should be**. Consider Proverbs 20:14, for example. Is this descriptive or prescriptive?

14 "Bad, bad," says the buyer,  
but when he goes away, then he boasts.

This is like the person who goes to a garage sale and says, "I don't know. . . my brother had that type of lawn mower once, and it wasn't very reliable. I don't think your mower is

worth \$100, but I'd give you \$50." So you buy the lawn mower for \$50 and then brag to your friends how good of a deal you got. "Bad, bad," says the buyer. . . he boasts."

This proverb is **descriptive** since it describes what often happens. It's not **prescriptive**, telling us how we should negotiate at garage sales. Of course, elsewhere in Proverbs and in Scripture we're told to be honest, not manipulative. But this proverb is making us wise, explaining how some people do business.

Here's one that **prescriptive**, telling us the way things should be. Proverbs 4:23 reads:

23 Keep your heart with all vigilance,  
for from it flow the springs of life.

This proverb clearly tells us that we should pay close attention to our hearts - our inner being - because it is the determining factor in how we live.

**Two Things to Appreciate.** Next, I'd like to mention a couple of things about Proverbs to **appreciate**. I'm encouraging you to appreciate these things because these are a couple of things that annoy some people about Proverbs. These two things actually help the book of Proverbs accomplish its purpose of making the simple wise and making the wise yet wiser.

1. Appreciate the random nature of Proverbs. Have you every wondered why all the proverbs about laziness aren't grouped together in one chapter? Instead they are sprinkled throughout the book of Proverbs? Why are there 15 or 20 different topics mentioned in rapid fire in one chapter? For example, in chapter 10, I count at least 17 different topics addressed.

Why is Proverbs so random? I tend to agree with those who say that Proverbs is random because life is random. On any single day you and I might face several of the issues found in Proverbs 10. Of course there's nothing wrong with finding all the proverbs that speak about some topic that's on your mind. But there's value in reading through a chapter like Proverbs 10 and allowing yourself to be confronted with issues that **aren't** on your mind.

For example, when you get up tomorrow morning, maybe you aren't thinking about a life of integrity vs. a life of deceit. But in your daily reading of Proverbs, you come to 10:9 and it gets your attention.

9 Whoever walks in integrity walks securely,  
but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out.

You look at that and observe that the parallelism is making a contrast between a person who "walks in integrity" and one "who makes his ways crooked." You notice the contrast in how they can live their lives. The person walking in integrity walks securely because they've got nothing to hide (no dread of being "found out"). By contrast the person who makes his way crooked will sooner or later be found out.

As you meditate on this proverbs, you find a growing desire to walk in integrity and walk securely. Because you fear the Lord you want your life to honor him. And so you pray, “God, with your help I want to walk in integrity today. I want to walk securely.” You didn’t go to Proverbs planning to ponder integrity, but now it’s on your mind. Later in the day when you’re tempted in some way, this proverb can remind you how good it is to stay on the straight path and walk in integrity.

My encouragement is to appreciate the random nature of the proverbs.

At the same time, I should mention that some passages and chapters *aren’t* very random; in some chapters topics *are* grouped together. Chapter 26 is a good example: the first 12 verses talk about what is true of fools; the next four verses talk about sluggards; and the last twelve verses talk about sins of the tongue (quarreling, whispering, deception, and lying).

*2. Appreciate the distinctives of Hebrew poetry.* Some people are annoyed by Hebrew poetry and by poetry in general. I used to be annoyed by poetry. I even bought a book about how to read poetry; I tried to read it several times but I just couldn’t force myself work my way through it. I kept thinking, “Poetry makes me work too hard. Why don’t they just state plainly what they’re trying to say?” If you tend to get annoyed by poetry like I did (past tense), let me encourage you to appreciate how poetry works on your soul. There is a reason that vast parts of Scripture are poetry: Psalms, Proverbs, most of Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the other prophets.

We’ve already talked about parallelism. Here I have in mind how Hebrew poetry engages our imagination in “striking and engaging ways” (as David Jackman puts it, *ST Workshop*). Ideas and images are put together in interesting ways that make us think and that make us remember. That’s especially important in Proverbs because the author has the ambitious goal of making us wise in everyday life. If that’s going to happen we have to be able to remember what we’ve read.

For example, consider Proverbs 26:17.

17 Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own  
is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.

One afternoon a couple of weeks ago, I drove home, got out of my car, and saw two dogs coming across my neighbor’s yard toward me. These weren’t cute little dogs; they looked a bit mangy and dangerous. There was no way I was going to reach out and try to pet them or grab them by the ears; who knows what that dog might do to me! In the same way, I should very, very reluctant to “meddle in a quarrel not my own” (since I might be inviting all sorts of unnecessary trouble).

You can remember that, right? The next time you see a dog passing by, you’ll think of this proverb. And the next time somebody tells you how they’re quarreling with someone over something, think twice before you get involved. There are times when you might

need to mediate between two people in a quarrel (see Philippians 4:3); then you're being a peacemaker. But if you meddle in other people's quarrels, you're being a troublemaker, and nothing good comes from it.

Appreciate that proverbs are memorable by design. Instead of saying, "Mind your own business," Proverbs 26:17 says, "Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears."

***My Plan for Feasting on Proverbs:***

Finally, I'd like to encourage you to make a simple plan for feasting on Proverbs. Many people have made it their practice to read a chapter of Proverbs every day. You basically read the entire book once a month. Many people have found that plan to be profitable. If you adopt that plan, I'd encourage you to pick a proverb or two each day in that day's chapter and spend some time savoring those two proverbs in light of the things we've talked about today. Don't let your objective be to read a chapter of Proverbs a day. The objective is to become wise as a result of feasting on Scripture.

My current practice for feasting on Proverbs involves buying a Scripture journal that has the text of Proverbs on the pages on the left; you can use the blank pages on the right to make observations and applications and insights. I just put a bookmark where I stopped reading; that's where I begin the next time I go to Proverbs. I might make it a chapter or only a few verses. I stop and spend time when I find a verse that engages my imagination.

If you live with your family or if you have roommates, your plan might involve reading and discussing the proverbs together each day or five days a week or one day a week - whatever works for you.

There aren't any rules for making a plan. But remember that the goal is to feast on Proverbs and become wise.