

The Book of Proverbs

A Primer

Summary

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Question 1: Short Summary of the Book

The book of Proverbs is a collection of sayings and maxims dating from various periods of the history of Israel and originating from various life settings from the family to the royal court and formally organized during the monarchy. Although the book of Proverbs is intimately linked to Solomon (1:1), the book itself indicates that many of these collections came from a variety of authors or compilers (“Words of Wise Men”: 22:17-24:34; “Words of Agur”: 30:1-33; “Words of King Lemuel”: 31:1-9).

Major themes

Proverbs covers a surprisingly broad variety of topics. Whole sections address sexual issues. Some of the proverbs discuss proper social behavior, the value of hard work and discipline, while others expound on the nature of wisdom itself.

Purpose

While the apparent disconnectedness of many of the proverbs may lead some to believe that there is no overall agenda, nothing could be further from the truth. Proverbs, faithful to the Wisdom tradition it represents, evokes life in all of its dimensions. The book targets an audience that has much in common with our contemporaries. Many observers claim that we are entering into what is called the “post-modern age,” i.e., an age characterized by the rejection of the old absolutes and the absence of consensus, particularly as it relates to metaphysical categories--morality, religion, and meaning. We believe that Hebrew wisdom literature can make a very significant contribution to the understanding of the Christian faith for our contemporaries. The reason is simple: The Wisdom books are specifically designed to address an audience which is faced with options, but will not accept to be coerced by tradition. The Wisdom writers thus do not dictate a point of view, but simply ask that their perspective on faith receive a fair hearing. To such an audience, then, the wise do not propose dogma, but extend an invitation to consider what gives true significance to human life from a perspective of faith.

One may express some surprise at the fact that, for the most part, the proverbs are not organized thematically. This is to force the reader to think about specific issues always in the light of different contexts. Issues of wealth and poverty, for example, cannot or at least should not be examined or reflected upon in abstraction from social and spiritual dimensions. The book of Proverbs is arranged in such a way that proverbs dealing with wealth and poverty are constantly juxtaposed to proverbs dealing with other issues. Because of this kind of organization, one cannot avoid then thinking about wealth and poverty in the light of these other topics, thus bringing a slightly different light on this issue in every case both by virtue of the angle the proverb adopts and the immediate context in which it is inserted.

Question 2: How does the book of Proverbs contribute to our understanding of the biblical story of salvation?

Elmer Martens has suggested in his book, *God's Design* (3rd ed., Bibal, 1999), that the heart of the Old Testament is centered on a God who has a special project for humanity. There are four aspects to this project: 1) deliverance; 2) community; 3) relationship with God; 4) land.

The God of the Old Testament is fundamentally a God who saves those who are in need. But God does not save simply for the sake of saving. He saves in order to create a special kind of community that will exemplify, by the quality of its community life, the character of the God of the universe. This community will be shaped by an ongoing relationship with God as defined more specifically in the Sinai Covenant and characterized by mutual loyalty. God has promised his people a place they can call their own, a home where they can fully experience the prosperity and peace God has in store for his people if they will remain faithful to him.

The development of the kind of community God envisions for Israel is contingent on a number of tools God has given Israel to help develop this distinct community. For example, the creation story is designed to provide an alternative worldview for a people who has integrated a pagan view of life while in bondage to the Egyptians. The covenant stipulations were given to the people of Israel to enable them to maintain, retain, and express their distinct identity as the people of God.

Question 3: What are the main biblical theology themes that are developed in the text? How does this particular book of the Bible connect with other books of the canon?

The basic theme of the book of Proverbs and wisdom literature as a whole is the choice between life and death. This theme is also found in Genesis 2-4, Deuteronomy (cf. 31) and is prevalent in prophetic literature.

Biblical Theology Themes (this discussion is borrowed from Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust. The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1972], pp. 14-28).

Walter Brueggemann offers one of the most helpful summaries of the theological underpinnings of wisdom theology and the book of Proverbs more specifically.

1. Wisdom teaches that the purpose and meaning of human existence is life (Pr. 12:28)

The ultimate purpose of the various exhortations, maxims, and instructions found in the book of Proverbs is to provide guidelines through which we can create and maintain life in its most profound sense (Pr 10:17,27). Life, in the context of Proverbs, is not defined simply in terms of existence. "Life" is a quality that permeates all aspects of human existence: emotional, physical, psychological, social, and spiritual. It is that which produces joy, security, and peace (*shalom*).

This life is not something that is experienced in isolation from other human beings. In the book of Proverbs, individuals are defined in terms of belonging to a community. The well being of individuals is ultimately dependent on the well being of their community (Pr 11:10-11).

The life that Proverbs points to is not something that is attainable only in some distant future; it is for now (Pr 13:12-25). Happiness and contentment accompany those who choose wisely, i.e., in a manner that promotes life rather than death.

2. Wisdom teaches that the authority to determine that which leads to life resides in our common experience.

We do not discern truth from falsehood simply by relying on some guru or list of dos and donts. Distinguishing good from evil, i.e., knowing the difference between that which promotes life rather than death is not always a simple matter. The field of medical ethics is but one example of the ambiguities that are inherent to the choices we must make. These choices are, more often than not, the result of an intentional, rational, conscious, and reasonable process. In this sense, wisdom is pragmatic rather than dogmatic. It seeks to justify the choice or the attitude to adopt rather than to impose it.

This is very important for people who live in a context where the very notion of authority is questioned, or for young people who demand to understand the reasons behind certain prescriptions. For example, it is imperative to live honestly, not simply because we must, but because honesty is a necessary condition to experience shalom on a personal level and in the community. To be generous is good, for the person who is generous prospers (Pr 11:25). Diligence is preferable to laziness, for the hardworking person will gain in influence (Pr 12:24). On the other hand, we must be careful not to oversimplify the proverbs. These sayings are not meant to be recipes that one applies without thought. If it is good to be generous, one must not be so generous as to end up in abject poverty. Kindness is good, but one must not be so kind as to put oneself in a position to be grossly exploited by others. Wisdom does not provide recipes to bypass the necessity to think. Wisdom is the integration of reason and experience.

3. Wisdom affirms that we have in our hands the primary responsibility for our destiny.

The wise observe that each person's destiny, his or her happiness depend mostly on his or her loyalties, commitments, decisions, and values (Pr 11:27; 18:21; 19:3; 12:20). The proverbs are unequivocal: our choices determine our future. The wise, by various literary devices, draw the attention of the reader on the wide range of possibilities that present themselves to each person. Wisdom assumes that human beings can choose wisely and responsibly.

There is nothing trivial about life. All the choices that are before us are critically important, for we live or we die by the choices we make. Wise decisions lead to life and create ripples of life around us. On the other hand, foolish decisions lead to death and create ripples of death. Wisdom excludes every form of determinism. We are given the power to determine the kind of person we will become and the kind of community we will live in.

4. Wisdom teaches that the universe is structured and meaningful.

Wisdom teaches that the universe conforms to a fundamental principle of order. Our task as human beings is to discover this principle and to live in accordance to it. Proverbs uses a number of expressions to denote this principle:

- Integrity (10:9)
- Instruction (10:17)
- Fear of the Lord (10:27)
- Prudence (12:23)
- Good understanding (13:15)
- etc.

The Book of Proverbs teaches that the universe functions according to principles that are reliable and predictable. The world is thus an expression of God's goodness and generosity. The universe is not something to fear. Wisdom clearly affirms that we live in a fundamentally friendly universe.

5. Wisdom celebrates humanity.

According to wisdom literature (cf. Genesis 1:27; 2:15-17; and Psalm 8), humanity is given responsibility to manage creation. God trusts humankind. The human race is not portrayed as a child that must be constantly restrained, but as an adult. Human beings are called to consider their status, their choices, their responsibilities, and their obligations and to act accordingly.

Question 4: What points of the MB Confession of Faith and/or Anabaptist core values are implicit in the text?

The book of Proverbs does not figure prominently in the list of references given to support the various articles of the MB confession of faith (the only two references in the Confession of faith are to Pr 8:22-31; 14:31). There are nevertheless, a number of confessional points that find support in the book of Proverbs.

Article 1:

*The Lord is said to be the source of wisdom (Pr 2:6). It is by wisdom that he created the universe (Pr 3:19; cf. 8:1-36).

*In Proverbs, the Lord is portrayed as just and merciful. He is the one who provides a shield to those who seek refuge in him (Pr 30:5) and to those who are blameless (Pr 2:7). Proverbs consistently portrays God as compassionate towards all creatures (Pr 6:16; 10:3). Those who are members of the covenant community must therefore act towards all according to the principles of kindness and fairness (Pr 3:27-32; 8:13).

Article 2:

Unlike the gods of the Ancient Near East whose will was difficult to discern, the God of Israel has revealed himself in various ways (nature, prophets, the Word). The entire book of Proverbs is a testimony to God's self-revelation. It points to the complexity of creation as a sign of God's wisdom and self-disclosure (Pr 3:19-20; 8:22-31; 30:3-4). Proverbs states repeatedly that true wisdom comes from God and that God gives it generously to those who seek it (Pr 1:1-7.20; 2:6; 8:12-17).

Article 3:

Proverbs 8:22-31 states that by wisdom God created the universe. Proverbs affirms human free will and human dignity (see comments under question 3 above for more details).

Article 4:

The wise are not naive about human nature. If, on the one hand, Proverbs recognizes the profound dignity and greatness of human nature, on the other hand, the wise also recognize the reality of sin, both personal and systemic, and the self-destructiveness of human nature left to its own devices. Proverbs dealing with foolishness (1:20-33), wickedness (4:16-17; 10:10, 14:34), violence (4:17; 13:2; 21:7; 24:12), anger (15:1; 29:11; 30:33), and exploitation (22:22) underline the reality and extent to which sin can poison human relationships and the integrity of the community of faith.

Article 5:

In Proverbs, divine wisdom is made available to men and women in order to enable them to create the kind of community that will reflect God's character and produce a community life that will be characterized by compassion, fairness, justice, and peace (2:1-3:35).

Article 10:

The book of Proverbs addresses the issue of discipleship in the sense that it is written to teach those who would be part of the covenant community how to live in a way that is compatible with the character of God. How we make decisions (11:14; 13:10; 16:3), how we conduct ourselves with those who weak and poor (14:31; 19:17), how we deal generally with our neighbors (14:21-22) are indications of the depth of our commitment to God.

Article 11:

Proverbs offers much advice in terms of sexual conduct and marital life. "Sexual intimacy rightfully takes place only within marriage." In that respect, for example, there are sizable portions of Proverbs that exhort the young man to avoid the prostitute and to remain faithful to his wife (5:1-21; 6:23-35; 7:1-27; 22:14). Although the possibility of strife and discord within the home is recognized (12:4b;

19:13; 21:9,19,26; 27:15), Proverbs teaches that the relationship between husband and wife and parents and children should be characterized by mutual respect and love (Pr 13:1, 24; 29:3; 31:10-31).

Article 12:

Although Proverbs does not extensively deal with the role of the state, there are nevertheless a number of passages that underline the role of the king and those in power to maintain order, protect the weak, insure that the poor are treated with compassion, and that justice prevails (6:10-13; 20:8; 20:26,28; 22:11; 29:4,14).

Article 13:

Proverbs condemns the use of violence to resolve conflicts, but promotes peace and goodwill as a way of life (4:14-17; 10:6,11; 13:2; 17:19; 20:22; 21:7; 24:1-2; 30:32-33).

Article 14:

Proverbs affirms the intrinsic value of human life by its repeated insistence on treating all men and women, regardless of their social status, with dignity, compassion, and respect (6:10-13; 14:31; 17:5; 19:17; 21:13; 22:2; 20:8; 20:26,28; 22:11; 29:4,14).

Article 15:

Proverbs strongly declares the sovereignty of God over creation. The earth was created by God (8:22-31), and all that humanity has ultimately comes from God. Because God is creator and ultimate provider, men and women are exhorted to develop an attitude of humility and gratefulness, which translates itself into an attitude of generosity towards the less fortunate (3:1-10; 11:25; 14:31; 22:9) and into a wise stewardship of one's resources, i.e., the kind of stewardship that does not only benefit the individual person, but also the entire community (10:4-5; 11:26; 13:11,22).

Question 8: Recommended study aids for author.

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The Book of Proverbs
Word Wise 13 Week Outline of Proverbs

Lesson One: Wisdom: What is it and What is it Good for?

(General introduction to wisdom and the book of Proverbs)

Lesson Two: Pedagogical Strategies: How Do You Get Them to Listen?

Lesson Three: Wisdom and Folly: How Can I Keep from Making a Fool of Myself?

Lesson Four: The Righteous and the Wicked (or Lifestyles of the Righteous and the Wicked)

Lesson Five: The Words We Say!

Lesson Six: The Family (or Family Relationships and Responsibilities)

Lesson Seven: Laziness and Hard Work

Lesson Eight: Wealth and Poverty

Lesson Nine: Friends and Neighbors (or Social Relationships and Responsibilities)

Lesson Ten: Plans and Decisions

Lesson Eleven: The Proud and the Humble

Lesson Twelve : Anger and Self-Control

Lesson Thirteen: The Fear of the Lord

The Book of Proverbs

Word Wise Lesson Outlines (Questions 6 and 7 of Outlining Guide)

Lesson One: Wisdom: What is it and What is it Good for?

The purpose of this lesson is to develop a basic understanding of wisdom literature in general and the book of Proverbs. The participants will be able to identify the wisdom books of the Old Testament, define wisdom, and get a general sense of the purpose and organization of the book of Proverbs (the writer may also wish to include a section that would deal with the worldview found in the Book of Proverbs, see question 2 above).

Describe your experience (opener)

Ask the participants to: 1) identify the wisdom books in the Old Testament; 2) give their understanding of what wisdom is; 3) share their thoughts on the nature of the Book of Proverbs.

Discover what God says (the study)

1. Old Testament wisdom literature

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three major sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Old Testament wisdom books are included in the third section. Wisdom literature refers more specifically to the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes. Although not a wisdom book in the strict sense of the term, the Song of Solomon, a collection of love poems, probably owes “its preservation and present form to Jewish sages who recognized its contribution to the ‘good life’” (R. E. Murphy, “Introduction to Wisdom Literature,” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* [Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968], p. 487).

2. Wisdom

a. General definition

Fundamentally, wisdom is the art of discernment. Its ultimate purpose is to put in evidence that which favors life or, on the contrary, that which leads to death and chaos. In order to live as well as possible and to minimize the number of failures, the wise man observes the reality that surrounds him and attempts to discern the true from the false, the useful from the useless, life from death. From his experience and that of his predecessors, he will draw lessons to guide his behavior (Antoine Vanet, *Cahier Evangile*, vol. 28, p. 6).

b. Wisdom in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, wisdom is embodied by the expression *hokma*. This term is used in a number of ways.

1) A specific ability (trade)

Ex 7:11; 35:10-11,30-35; Is 44:25; 47:10

2) Intelligence, insight, shrewdness

a) Academic wisdom

1 Kings 4:29; Eccl 1:16-17; Job 38:36-37; Pr 30:3

b) Shrewdness

1 Kings 2:6,9; Ex 1:10

3) Common sense

Pr 1:5; 2:10-11; 14:8

4) The understanding of fundamental questions (good and evil, humanity's fate, meaning of human existence, justice, faithfulness to God, etc.)

Pr 3:13-20

c. Types of wisdom writings

In the Old Testament, there are two kinds of wisdom writings. Job and Ecclesiastes constitute longer works of literature that deal at length with deep human issues such as suffering and the meaning of existence. Proverbs, however, mainly contains shorter sayings that address issues men and women face in the course of their daily lives: social relationships, plans and decisions, family dynamics, the use of the tongue, etc.

3. The Book of Proverbs

a. Introduction

The book of Proverbs is a collection of sayings and maxims dating from various periods of the history of Israel and originating from various life settings, from the family to the royal court, and formally organized during the monarchy. Although the book of Proverbs is intimately linked to Solomon (1:1), the book itself indicates that many of these collections came from a variety of authors or compilers ("Words of Wise Men": 22:17-24:34; "Words of Agur": 30:1-33; "Words of King Lemuel": 31:1-9).

b. Major themes

The Proverbs cover a surprisingly broad variety of topics. Whole sections address sexual issues. Many proverbs discuss proper social behavior, the value of hard work and discipline, while others expound on the nature of wisdom itself.

Claus Westermann (*Roots of Wisdom*, 1995) has organized the Proverbs according to the following categories:

1. Proverbs of Observation and Experience
 - a. Observations on People (Pr 27:19)
 - b. Contrasts
 - 1) Joy and Sadness (12:25)
 - 2) Hunger and Contentment (27:7)
 - 3) The Good Word and the Evil Word (25:12-20)
 - 4) The Destructive Word (26:2)
 - c. The Person and His/Her Social Status, Work, and Possessions
 - 1) The Work of the Farmer (24:27)
 - 2) Laziness and Diligence (12:11)
 - 3) The Poor and the Rich (14:4)
 - d. The Person in Community and in Family
 - 1) The Young and the Old (20:29)
 - 2) Brothers (27:10)
 - 3) Man and His Wife (12:4)
 - 4) Parents (15:20)
 - e. The Person and Public Life
 - 1) The World of Business (20:10)
 - 2) Law (17:15)
 - 3) Politics and War, the Cult
 - f. The King
 - 1) Royal Politics (25:2)
 - 2) The King's Favor and Wrath (14:35)
 - 3) The Instruction of the King (31:1-9)
 - 4) The King and Yahweh
 - g. The Messenger (25:13)
2. Proverbs Dealing with the Human Personality
 - a. Those who Threaten the Community
 - 1) The Malicious (26:23-27)
 - 2) The one who Promotes Violence (26:17-22)
 - 3) The Proud (16:18; 18:12)
 - 4) The Deceiver (26:27; 28:10)
 - 5) Indifference towards the Weak (21:10)
 - b. Types of Behavior (25:14,19,23; 29:5)
 - c. The Stupid (26:1,3,6,7,11,12)
 - d. The One who Promotes the Community (11:25; 19:17,22; 22:9; 25:21)
3. General Instructions
 - a. The Necessity of Wisdom (1-9)
 - b. Words of Exhortation (22-24)

The following themes are particularly important and have been selected for further reflection for this series of Sunday school lessons on the Book of Proverbs: wisdom and folly, the righteous and the wicked, the tongue, the family, laziness and hard work, wealth and poverty, friends and

neighbors, plans and decisions, the proud and the humble, anger and self-control, the fear of the Lord.

c. Purpose

While the apparent disconnectedness of many of the proverbs may lead some to believe that there is no overall agenda, nothing could be further from the truth. Proverbs, faithful to the Wisdom tradition it represents, evokes life in all of its dimensions. The book targets an audience that has much in common with our contemporaries. Many observers claim that we are entering into what is called the “post-modern age,” i.e., an age characterized by the rejection of the old absolutes and the absence of consensus, particularly as it relates to metaphysical categories--morality, religion, and meaning. We believe that Hebrew wisdom literature can make a very significant contribution to the understanding of the Christian faith for our contemporaries. The reason is simple: the Wisdom books are specifically designed to address an audience which is faced with options, but will not accept to be coerced by tradition. The Wisdom writers thus do not dictate a point of view, but simply ask that their perspective on faith receive a fair hearing. To such an audience, then, the wise do not propose dogma, but extend an invitation to consider what gives true significance to human life from a perspective of faith.

While it is true that the wise cannot impose their perspective on God and life, they do, however, extend their invitation with passion and conviction, for, in the end, their invitation is a matter of life and death. So the wise use all the tools at their disposal to persuade their audience to embrace Yahweh and to be faithful to him.

Deliberate the implications (the analysis)

The participants could discuss their own understanding of what an orientation towards life or death means today, and what that implies for their own reading of Proverbs.

Determine what you will do (the application)

The participants should commit themselves to read the entire Book of Proverbs while asking the following questions: What does it mean to live with an orientation towards life? What does it mean to live with an orientation towards death?

Lesson Two: Pedagogical Strategies: How Do You Get Them to Listen?

Primary References:

1:1-19; 3:1-2,4,5-10; 4:23-24; 5:22-23; 6:9-11; 7:1-27; 8:5; 10:1,4,15,26-32; 12:4,11; 14:26-27; 15:16,20,24,27; 17:6,21,25; 19:13; 22:17-21; 23:12,22,26; 24:2,33-34; 26:13-16; 28:19; 30:5,17; 31:1-3,10-31

If the purpose of the Book of Proverbs is to persuade young people to choose the way of life rather than the way of death, then the primary concern of the wise is related to how they will manage to convince these young people to adopt the way of life. As anyone who has had any experience with raising children or teaching students knows, the use of a variety of teaching/learning approaches will usually translate into a higher degree of success with the student. The wise are fully aware of this principle and use therefore a variety of methods to convey their message

This lesson will help the students gain a sense of the pedagogical strategies used in the book of Proverbs. The students will be led to consider the effectiveness of these strategies and how they can be used in various real life situations (ex. children, Sunday school, congregation, etc.)

Describe your experience (opener)

The leader or a participant describes an effective learning experience. This experience can relate to a formal educational setting or to a learning experience linked to the acquisition of a valuable life lesson. Some of the other participants could also be asked to describe such learning experiences. The purpose of this exercise is to begin to identify some commonly-used pedagogical strategies.

Discover what God says (the study)

1. Appeals to consider the benefits of adopting the way of life

- a. The acquisition of knowledge: 1:1-7
- b. A good reputation: 1:8-9; 3:4; 13:1;
- c. Long and peaceful life: 10:27; 14:27; 15:24
- d. Physical health: 3:7-8
- e. Peace of heart: 14:26; 15:16
- f. Success/prosperity: 10:4; 3:1-2,5-6,9-10; 12:11

2. Appeals to consider the consequences of adopting the way of death (the texts build on primal fears most human beings experience):

- Fear of death with no burial: 30:17
- Fear of violence and untimely death: 1:10-19; 5:22-23; 7:1-27
- Fear of poverty: 6:9-11; 24:33-34; 28:19

- Fear of losing one's reputation: 10:26
- Fear of inner corruption (loss of character): 4:23-24

3. Appeals to consider the excellence of the principles and teachings offered to the student: 22:17-21; 30:5;

4. Exhortations from the heart, i.e., offered with emotion and urgency (this principle underlines the fact that people are often as likely to be persuaded by an emotional appeal as by reason): 1:8; 23:12,22,26; 31:1-3

5. A call to recognize the consequences of one's actions on loved ones:
10:1; 12:4; 15:20,27; 17:6,21,25; 19:13

6. Appeals to consider examples of godly living (the role model): 31:10-31

7. Ridicule/sarcasm/humor: 7:22-23; 8:5; 26:13-16

8. The use of contrast:

Strong contrast is frequently used to emphasize a point. This technique is often used, for example, to compare the righteous and the wicked: 10:27,28,29,30,31,32

9. The use of repetition:

The book of Proverbs uses repetition both to underline the importance of the various themes that are found in its pages and to facilitate learning for the hearer.

10. The use of multiple contexts:

Readers often wonder why the editors of the book of Proverbs did not regroup the passages that deal with a particular topic together. One could argue that a thematic organization of Proverbs would facilitate access to the contents of the book. Although one cannot tell for sure what the motives of the editors might have been in organizing the book the way they did, I think the answer has to do with the necessity and the importance of looking at any issue in the light of various contexts. Moral, ethical, and social issues are by their very nature complex and many-faceted and require the consideration of a wide variety of factors.

When it comes to helping someone think through such an issue as wealth and money, one's reflection will be greatly enhanced by the immediate context(s) in which the theme is considered. The introduction of various contexts into the issue being discussed can become a powerful pedagogical tool to help the students think through a theme from various angles. In other words, wealth and poverty cannot be dealt with in some kind of artificial isolation. What these themes are juxtaposed to or in what context we consider them will determine, to a great extent, the direction our thinking will take.

Example: The issue of wealth is alluded to in a number of proverbs. In 10:15, we read: "The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor." Taken in

isolation, this text seems to indicate that the ultimate good in life is to be wealthy. But this verse is not given in isolation. The reader who reads Proverbs with care and attention will have read verse 14, which states that the “fool” comes to ruin, and will also consider verse 16 where the author contrasts the wages of the righteous and the income of the wicked. Both verses 14 and 16 contribute to developing a more subtle picture of wealth and poverty.

Deliberate the implications (the analysis)

The participants could be encouraged to deliberate on the value and benefits of the strategies they have identified and on reasons that may motivate the use of such a variety of pedagogical techniques. What is the difference between trying persuasion and manipulation? Does Proverbs manipulate the reader by appealing unfairly to basic human fears?

Determine what you will do (the application)

The participants need to examine how they communicate with their colleagues, spouses, children, etc. Are they using sound techniques of persuasion, particularly when it comes to giving direction to others? Are they effective? Are they manipulative? What are their motives?

Lesson Three: Wisdom and Folly: How Can I Keep from Making a Fool of Myself?

Primary References:

1:7,22,23-33; 2:1-6,12,16; 3:7,13-18; 8:11-12,14,15-16,18,32-34,36; 9:9,11,13-18; 10:8,14,23; 11:29; 12:1,8,15-16,23; 13:1,14-16,20; 14:1,3,6-9,15-18,24,33,35; 15:2,5,7,14,20-21,24; 16:16,21-23; 17:10,12,16,21,24-25,28; 18:2,4,6-7,15; 19:8,10,13,25,29; 20:1,15; 21:16,20; 22:3,12; 23:9; 24:3-7,13-14; 26:1,3-12; 27:3,11-12,22; 28:26; 29:3,8-9; 30:32-33.

The primary purpose of this lesson is to discover the characteristics of wisdom and folly and the consequences of each. The student will discover that the one who chooses wisdom will experience life, whereas the one who chooses folly will ultimately embark on a course that will produce chaos and lead to death.

Describe your experience (opener)

Participants could be asked to describe anecdotes that would illustrate the character of what they would consider to be a fool and a wise person.

Discover what God says (the study)

1. Characteristics of the Fool or Folly

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

2. Characteristics and Value of Wisdom or the Wise

3:7; 8:11,12,14,; 9:9; 10:8; 12:15; 13:1,14; 14:1; 15:2,7,14,20,21; 16:16,21,23; 17:10,24; 18:15; 19:25; 20:1,15; 24:13-14; 27:11-12; 29:3,8.

3. Consequences of Folly

1:22-32; 8:36; 9:13-18; 10:8; 11:29; 13:20; 14:3,24; 15:24; 16:22; 22:3.

4. Benefits of Wisdom

1:33; 2:1-6,12,16; 3:13-18; 8:15-16,18,32-34; 9:11; 10:14; 12:8; 13:15,20; 14:3,33,35; 15:24; 16:22; 18:4; 19:8; 21:20; 24:3-7; 22:3.

Deliberate the implications (the analysis)

These texts define the characteristics of the fool and the wise person and the consequences and benefits of the one and the other. The participants can engage these texts in terms of thinking through how that would translate in our culture and in their respective settings.

Determine what you will do (the application)

The participants reflect on their own character and identify characteristics of the fool that they exemplify or characteristics of the wise they wish to demonstrate to a greater degree.

Lesson Four: The Righteous and the Wicked (or Lifestyles of the Righteous and the Wicked)

References:

3:33; 4:14-19; 5:22; 6:12-15,16-19; 10:2-3,6-7,9,10,11,16,24-25,27-32; 11:3-4,5-8,10-11,18-21,23,28,30-31; 12:2-3,5-7,10,12-13,21,26,28; 13:5-6,9,21-22,15; 14:9,11,14,19,22,32,34; 15:3,6,8-9,26,28,29; 16:4,8,12,17,27-28,30-31; 17:2,13,23-24; 18:3,10; 20:7,26; 21:3,10,12,15,18,21,26-27; 22:5,8; 24:8-9,15-16,19; 25:4-5,26; 26:24-26; 28:1,4-5,9,10,12,15,18,28; 29:2,6-7,16,27.

The purpose of this lesson is to help the participants identify the characteristics of the righteous and the wicked and to consider the consequences of choosing to live like the one or the other. One of the common themes that occur again and again is that God detests the ways of the wicked and works to bring about their demise, but loves and honors the righteous and intervenes to establish them firmly. As in the previous lesson, wickedness leads to death and chaos, whereas righteousness produces life and harmony.

Describe your experience (opener)

The leader shares a story to illustrate a righteous or a wicked person (an illustration from a popular movie might work well). The participants can be invited to contribute to the discussion as well.

Discover what God says (the study)

Some things to keep in mind:

*The righteous and the wicked are usually contrasted in the same proverb. There are only a few proverbs that describe simply one or the other.

*The distinction between category one and two is not always as clear as the division below suggests. I have attempted to include in category 1 those proverbs that seem to put the emphasis more on a description of the righteous and the wicked. Some proverbs are included in both categories.

1. Characteristics of the Righteous and the Wicked

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

2. Benefits of Righteousness and Consequences of Wickedness

3:33; 4:18-19; 5:22; 6:12-15; 10:31,32; 11:3,4,5,6,7,8,10,11,18,20,21,28,30,31; 12:2,3,7,13,21,26,28; 13:6,9,21,22,25;14:11,14,19,22,32,34; 15:6,8; 16:4,31; 17:13; 18:3,10; 20:7; 21:12,18,21; 22:8; 24:15-16; 25:4-5; 28:12,18,28; 29:2,6,16.

Deliberate the implications (the analysis)

The participants are invited to consider how to translate for our own time these two categories of people. Who could be considered righteous and wicked in our world? Participants are asked to consider how the benefits attached to righteousness and the consequences tied to wickedness find expression in our culture.

Determine what you will do (the application)

Participants are asked to consider how they can promote righteousness around them and contribute to limit wickedness in their respective settings.

Lesson Five: The Words We Say.

Primary References:

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

The purpose of this lesson is to illustrate the dangers and benefits associated with the use of the tongue in everyday life. According to Proverbs, the words we use do two things. First, they manifest the character of the person. In a sense, they are literally a character indicator. The rule is simple: good, wise, and useful words come out of those who are wise and good, whereas stupid and destructive discourse reflects the foolishness and destructiveness of the person. Second, Proverbs emphasizes the immense potential of words for promoting and creating life or for producing death and chaos.

Describe your experience (opener)

The leader (a participant could also be asked to prepare ahead of time) tells a story that illustrates the power of words in everyday life (it can be a positive or a negative example).

Discover what God says (the study)

1. Words as indicators of character (Listen to what I say and you will discover who I am.)

10:18,19,20,31,32; 11:12,13; 12:6,17; 14:5,25; 15:2; 16:23,27,28; 17:27,28; 18:4; 20:15,19; 26:20-28; 29:20

2. Dangers associated with the use of the tongue.

6:1-5; 10:19,21; 11:11; 12:6,13,18,19,22; 13:3; 15:1,4; 16:27,28; 18:6-8,13,20,21; 19:5,9; 20:19; 21:6,23; 22:10; 26:20-28; 27:2; 29:20

3. Benefits associated with the use of the tongue.

10:21; 11:11; 12:6,13,14,18,19,22,25; 13:2,3; 14:25; 15:1,4,23; 16:24; 18:20,21; 21:23; 22:11; 25:11,15; 28:23

Deliberate the implications (the analysis)

The leader invites the participants to explain why and to what extent words reveal the true character of a person and to identify contemporary examples that illustrate the power of words. The participants are invited to consider the psychological and social aspects of the reasons behind the power of human discourse.

Determine what you will do (the application)

The leader invites the participants to keep track of the kind of conversation they hold for about a week and to analyze these discussions in terms of determining what they reveal about their character and what their words produce around them.

Lesson Six: The Family (or Family Relationships and Responsibilities)

Primary References:

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

The purpose of this lesson is to explore the teaching of Proverbs on family dynamics. More specifically, we will study the responsibilities of family members as they relate to one another. The book of Proverbs deals with three categories of people. It outlines the responsibilities of children, that of parents in relation to their children, and the responsibilities of spouses towards one another. In this last instance, although Proverbs mostly singles out the “wife,” it would be more appropriate, in our cultural context, to read these passages as applying equally to both men and women.

Describe your experience (opener)

The leader outlines the roles of husbands and wives in a foreign culture (Japan, China, etc.).

Discover what God says (the study)

1. Responsibilities of Children

10:1; 13:1; 15:20; 17:6,21,25; 19:13,26; 20:11,20; 28:24; 29:3; 30:11,17

2. Responsibilities of parents

13:24; 17:6; 19:18,27; 20:7; 22:6,15; 23:13-16,19-28; 27:11; 29:15; 31:1-3,10-31

3. Responsibilities of spouses

12:4; 15:27; 18:22; 19:13,14; 21:9,19; 25:24; 27:15-16; 31:10-31

Deliberate the implications (the analysis)

The leader invites the participants to reflect on how the teaching of Proverbs regarding the responsibilities of the various family members can be contextualized for our own culture. Is the teaching of the Proverbs applicable to our own situation?

Determine what you will do (the application)

In our society, we have been conditioned to use the language and categories of rights and privilege to denote the quality of our social relationships, even the most intimate ones: those we cultivate in our immediate family. The paradigm proposed in Proverbs focuses more specifically on responsibilities. The participants are invited to reflect on their own family dynamics to identify their positive and negative aspects, and to devise ways to bring them more in line with the model proposed in Proverbs.

Lesson Seven: Laziness and Hard Work

Primary References:

6:6-11; 10:4-5,26; 12:11,24,27; 13:4; 14:23; 15:19; 18:9; 19:15,24; 20:4,13; 21:25-26; 22:13; 24:27,30-34; 26:12-16; 27:23-27; 28:19; 31:10-31

The purpose of this lesson is to explore various lifestyle patterns a person can adopt. The teaching of Proverbs on this issue is outlined, as is typical of wisdom literature, according to two extremes: the lazy person and the diligent person. It is important to note that laziness or hard work does not simply refer to whether a person is busy or not. Although these two expressions do describe, partly, the level of activities a person engages in, they, more importantly, describe the quality of what one does. For example, to be industrious, according to Proverbs, is not simply to be occupied; it refers to someone who is engaged in productive activities.

Describe your experience (opener)

The leader gives one of two examples of people who could be described as industrious or lazy.

Discover what God says (the study)

1. The industrious person

10:5; 12:27; 24:27; 27:23-27; 28:19; 31:10-31

2. The Lazy person

6:6-11; 10:26; 12:11,27; 13:4; 18:9; 19:24; 20:4; 22:13; 24:30-34; 26:12-16; 28:19

3. The benefits of industriousness

10:4; 12:11,24; 13:4; 14:23; 15:19; 20:13; 28:19; 31:10-31

4. The consequences of laziness

6:6-11; 10:4,5; 12:24; 13:4; 14:23; 15:19; 19:15; 20:4,13; 21:25; 24:30-34; 28:19

Deliberate the implications (the analysis)

The participants are invited to consider what it means to be industrious or lazy in our culture. What are the implications for people who are caught in a chronic cycle of unemployment in economically depressed regions or even in developing nations? Is the notion of industriousness the same as being busy? What is the difference between the two?

Determine what you will do (the application)

The leader outlines, with the help of the participants, the lifestyle characteristics of the industrious and the lazy person in our culture and invites the participants to examine their own lives in order to determine where they would position themselves on an industrious-lazy scale. If the participants perceive themselves as industrious, they are then invited to reflect on the nature of their activities: are they only busy or are they industrious in the way Proverbs defines it? The participants who feel that their lifestyle represents the other side of the spectrum are invited to think about the reasons they have adopted such a self-destructive pattern and to develop a strategy that will take them in a different direction.

Lesson Eight: Wealth and Poverty: A Wisdom Perspective

Primary Texts: 10:2,4-5,15-16; 11:4, 24-26, 28; 13:7-8, 11, 21-23; 14:4, 20-21, 23-24 31; 15:27; 17:1, 5, 16; 18:11, 23; 19:4, 7, 17; 21:13, 17, 21; 22:1, 2, 4, 7, 9,16, 22-23, 26, 28; 23:4-5, 10; 24:30-34; 27:23-27; 28:3, 6, 8,11, 19-20, 22, 27; 30:8-9; 31:20.

The primary purpose of this lesson is to understand what Proverbs teaches about wealth and poverty. The key question will be: How does wisdom inform the questions of economic and material disparity both in our culture and in the global setting. We will see that Proverbs deals with this issue through four main themes.

Describe your Experience (opener)

The writers of the Proverbs assume that wealth and poverty are a fact of life. Have the class identify examples of economic disparity – locally, nationally, internationally. List possible causes, triggers, and resultant issues.

Discover what God says (the study)

Proverbs deals with the issue of wealth and poverty through the following themes:

1. Source of Wealth/Cause of Poverty

- a) God's Perspective – rich and poor are equal in God's sight.
Proverbs 22:2; 29:13
- b) Wealth is a blessing from God for diligence, generosity, righteousness. Poverty is the result of laziness, folly, or injustice.
Proverbs 10:4-5; 11:24-26; 13:11, 21-23; 14: 4, 21, 23-24; 19:15; 21:21; 22:4, 9; 24:30-31, 27:23-27; 28:19-20, 22

2. Advantages of Wealth/Plight of Poverty

- a) Proverbs doesn't mince words. There are definite advantages to wealth. Conversely, poverty brings many other problems.
Proverbs 10:15-16; 14:20-21, 23-24; 18:11; 19:4, 7; 22:1

3. Responsibility of Wealth

- a) Proverbs is clear about the responsibility that wealth brings.
Proverbs 14:31; 19:17; 21:13; 22:9; 28: 27; 29:7; 31:20
- b) Proverbs also warns about the misuse of wealth
Proverbs 14:31; 18:23; 22:16, 22-23, 28; 23:10, 28:3, 8

4. Dangers of Wealth/Poverty

- a) Proverbs warns about the dangers that dependence on wealth brings.
Proverbs 11:4,28; 13:7-8; 15:27; 17:1,5,16; 21:17; 23:4-5; 28:6

- b) Proverbs warns about the folly of guaranteeing another's debt.
Proverbs 17:18; 22:7; 22:26-27

Deliberate the Implications (the analysis)

These texts lay out some clear implications about the use and misuse of wealth. Participants may want to engage these issues from the perspective of “the Protestant work ethic,” or social action, or perhaps even the implications for a wealthy “bottom-line” oriented society.

Determine what you will do (the application)

Participants will want to reflect on their own attitudes toward wealth, and on how they, as individuals, can use their resources in a wholesome, God-honoring way.

Lesson Nine: Friends and Neighbors (or **Social Relationships and Responsibilities**)

Primary References:

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

The purpose of this lesson is to examine what contributes to building a healthy community. According to Proverbs, a healthy community is not primarily defined in terms of efficient structures and governments. To live in a healthy community first and foremost denotes the quality of the relationships that are cultivated between the individuals who compose that community and the level of accountability the individuals feel towards the greater community.

Describe your experience (opener)

The leader provides an example of a dysfunctional community.

Discover what God says (the study)

1. The people with whom we associate.

12:26; 13:30; 14:7; 23:1-3,6-8; 25:17

2. The good friend

15:23,30; 17:9,17; 18:24; 23:6; 25:11,12; 27:5-6,9,10; 28:23

3. Social realities

14:20; 18:19; 19:4,6; 25:20; 27:4,14

4. The community builder

14:9,21; 16:6; 17:9; 20:3; 21:14; 22:11; 25:8-10,11-12,13; 28:13

5. The community destroyer

14:9,21; 16:28; 17:9,14,19; 18:1,6,8; 20:3; 21:10; 22:10; 24:28-29; 25:8-10,18; 26:17,18-19,20-21; 27:14; 28:13,23; 29:1,5,32-33

Deliberate the implications (the analysis)

The development of a healthy community is a complex process. It requires, at the very least, the involvement of people committed to be the right kind of person and to foster those values that promote life in the community. The participants are invited to evaluate the community or communities in which they live in order to determine whether they can be characterized as healthy communities. What would these communities need in order to improve their quality of life?

Determine what you will do (the application)

The leader identifies various communities in which the average person participates (home, work place, school, etc.) and invites the participants to consider one of these in terms of how they can contribute to improving its quality of life.

Lesson Ten: Plans and Decisions

Primary References:

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

The purpose of this lesson is to explore the factors that contribute to success or failure in the projects we undertake. It is important to note that Proverbs does not offer a sure-fire recipe for success; no quick rich schemes here! It does offer, however, highly relevant advice of what constitutes success and how a person can orient his or her life in such a way as to live a life that will be characterized by real success.

Describe your experience (opener)

The leader asks the participants to give various definitions of success and to comment on how one achieves it.

Discover what God says (the study)

1. The Secret of Success

11:14; 12:5; 13:10; 15:22; 16:3,7,10,20; 17:8; 18:16; 19:2,16,20; 19:21; 21:14,30; 24:3-4, 5,6; 27:23-27

2. The Secret of Failure

11:14; 15:12; 15:22; 16:25; 19:2,3,16,27; 20:25; 24:8,9; 28:8

3. The Importance of Discernment and Reflection

11:15,26; 14:15; 15:14; 16:2; 17:18,23; 19:20,27; 20:5,16,25; 21:14,29; 22:26-27; 24:3-4,5,6; 27:1,12,13; 27:23-27

4. The Sovereignty of God

16:1,2,3,7,9,11,20,33; 19:21; 20:10,23,24; 21:2,3,30,31; 27:1

Deliberate the implications (the analysis)

First, the participants are asked to reflect on how Proverbs defines success and failure. Second, the leader invites the participants to contrast the methods by which one attains success in Proverbs with the selfish and self serving approach that is often perceived as necessary to achieve success as it is commonly understood in our culture.

Determine what you will do (the application)

Lead the participants into a reflection on what they understand as success. Does it agree with Proverbs? Does their lifestyle reflect an adequate understanding of real success?

Lesson Eleven: The Proud and the Humble

Primary References:

11:2; 13:10; 15:25,33; 16:5,18,19; 18:12; 21:4,24; 22:4; 25:6,7,27; 27:2; 29:23; 30:13,32

The purpose of this lesson is to explore the notions of pride and humility as defined in Proverbs. Pride is not simply a feeling of satisfaction about one self and one's accomplishment. Humility has very little to do with self-effacement and self-deprecation. Pride and humility relate primarily to one's view of God. The proud does not fear God. In other words, the proud gives no consideration to God. The proud is self-sufficient and lives simply in terms of his/her own interests regardless of the human cost.

Describe your experience (opener)

The leader asks the participants to provide various definitions of pride and humility and to illustrate by referring to specific examples.

Discover what God says (the study)

1. The Proud

a. Who is the proud person?

21:4,24; 25:6-7; 27:2; 30:13,32

b. What are the consequences of pride?

11:2; 13:10; 15:25; 16:5,18; 18:12; 25:6-7; 29:23

2. The Humble

a. Who is the humble person?

13:10; 15:25,33; 16:19; 22:4; 25:6-7,27

b. What are benefits of humility?

11:2; 13:10; 15:25,33; 18:12; 22:4; 25:6-7; 29:23

Deliberate the implications (the analysis)

How does Proverbs' definition of pride and humility differ from various popular understandings of pride and humility? Proverbs states that, while humility leads to life, pride often leads to a person's dishonor and even destruction. Why is that the case?

Determine what you will do (the application)

The leader invites the participants to assess the character of their relationship with God. Do they live with submission and expectation? Are their lives characterized by impatience and the urge to control everything around them? The kind of life we lead and the quality of our relationships serves as a good barometer of whether we cultivate true humility in our lives.

Lesson Twelve: Anger and Self-Control

Primary References:

14:16,17,29-30; 15:1,18; 16:14,32; 17:27; 19:11,19; 20:2; 22:24-25; 25:15-16,27-28; 28:7; 29:8,11,22

The purpose of this lesson is to discover the characteristics of the person who is patient and self-controlled and those of the person whose life is characterized by anger and the lack of self-control. The participants will also explore how the one lifestyle and the other affect the quality of one's existence and that of the community.

Describe your experience (opener)

The leader asks the participants to define such terms as anger, patience, and self-control.

Discover what God says (the study)

1. Who is the angry person? Who is the person who lacks self-control?

14:16,29; 25:28; 29:11

2. Consequences of anger and lack of self-control

14:17; 15:1,18; 16:14; 19:19; 22:24-25; 25:16; 28:7; 29:8,22

3. Who is the patient person? Who is the person who has self-control?

14:16,29; 17:27; 19:11; 22:24-25; 25:27; 29:11

4. Benefits of patience and self-control

15:1,18; 16:14,32; 20:2; 25:15; 28:7; 29:8

Deliberate the implications (the analysis)

The leader asks the participants to share stories that illustrate the positive impact of people who are patient and self-controlled and the negative impact of those who generally react with anger and do not exemplify self-restraint.

Determine what you will do (the application)

The participants are invited to examine their lives carefully in order to determine whether they practice self-control and whether their lives are characterized by patience rather than anger. The participants are encouraged to identify one area of their lives where it is imperative for them to develop these qualities.

Lesson Thirteen: The Fear of the Lord

Primary References:

1:7,29; 2:5; 3:7; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:2,16,26-27; 15:16-33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; 24:21-22; 28:14; 29:25; 31:30

The purpose of this lesson is to explore the most fundamental concept in wisdom literature: the fear of the Lord. The participants will discover what it means to fear the Lord, but will also explore why it is a prerequisite to obtaining wisdom.

Describe your experience (opener)

The leader reads Pr 9:10 and asks the participants to briefly react to the expression, “The fear of the Lord.” What does it mean? Why is it so important?

Discover what God says (the study)

1. What is the fear of the Lord? Definition

1:29; 2:5; 3:7-10; 8:13; 14:2,16; 15:16-33; 16:6; 23:17; 29:25

2. Benefits

1:7; 3:7-10; 9:10; 10:27; 14:26,27; 15:16-33; 19:23; 22:4; 24:21-22; 28:14; 29:25; 31:30

The leader could also lead the participants into a study of Psalm 90, a wisdom psalm that connects explicitly the fear of the Lord and the apparent meaninglessness and futility of human life.

Deliberate the implications (the analysis)

The leader invites the participants to determine, in the light of their study of the text, what it means to fear the Lord and how it connects to wisdom and understanding. This question is particularly important for people who live in a secular society where the faith perspective is generally perceived as irrelevant for the acquisition of knowledge.

Determine what you will do (the application)

The participants are invited to consider whether and to what extent their lives exemplify the fear of the Lord.