

BaptistWay Bible Series for November 19: Wisdom for every area of life

November 9, 2006

Posted: 11/09/06

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Wisdom for every area of life

- Proverbs 22:17-25; 23:10-11, 19-28; 24:10-12, 15-20

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When preceded by the ear-splitting shrill of his omnipresent whistle, the first words out of the mouth of my basketball coach almost invariably were the two-word injunction to “Listen up!” It was a call to attention, punctuated by the clear message that the instructions to follow deserved not only to be heard but obeyed. An unspoken message also was clearly understood by the young men who huddled around the coach: These instructions, if followed, would lead to success.

A similar tone permeates the collection of sayings found in this week’s focal passages from Proverbs 22-24. The admonition, “Incline your ear and hear my words, and apply your mind to my teaching” (22:17), conveys the message, “Listen up!” And the implied message is also clear: These teachings, if implemented, will lead to success through lives lived according to God’s purpose.



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Introduction

The section that begins with 22:17 demonstrates the purpose, style and structure of the Book of Proverbs outlined briefly in the first lesson. It reflects the characteristics of a “collection of collections of wisdom materials” gathered over time and compiled and edited into the book we know as Proverbs. It also reflects the original purpose of Proverbs as a kind of “textbook for life” used for moral and intellectual training of young Hebrew men. In this section, these admonitions may have been intended particularly for preparation for leadership in the religious life of the community.

This section is composed almost exclusively of instructions or admonitions, usually directed to “my son” or “sons,” one of the two distinctive forms of Hebrew poetry found throughout the book. This collection of “the words of the wise” (v. 17) is presented in the form of 30 proverbial sayings (v. 20). Most are in the form of synonymous parallelism, in which the same idea is expressed in both lines of the couplet, or formal or synthetic parallelism, in which the second line advances or completes the thought of the first. The focal texts include 11 of these 30 sayings.

Sound advice

The admonition to “incline your ear and hear my words” is a call to pay attention (echoed in 23:12, 19 and 26). Any teacher knows the posture or body language of the student who is truly intent on learning, who “hangs on every word” spoken by the instructor. Proverbs repeatedly emphasizes the wisdom of a holistic approach to learning that involves the mind and the heart.

The slogan, “A mind is a terrible thing to waste,” applies just as much to the rigorous thinking required of Christian faith as to an college scholarship campaign. Furthermore, if these teachings of the Hebrew sages are internalized—if they are kept “within you” and “ready on your lips” (v. 18)—then they will be put to good use in everyday life.

The purpose of such teaching is clear: “So that your trust may be in the Lord” (v. 18). This statement reiterates Proverbs’ theme, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7) and its admonition to “Trust in the Lord with all your heart ... (and) in all your ways acknowledge him” (3:5-6). The sayings that follow spell out specific ways to trust in God and follow God’s way.

Call to justice

A life lived wisely, that points to all that “is right and true” (v. 21), is lived in sympathy with God’s compassion for the poor and God’s demand for justice for the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. God’s special concern for “the least of these” (Matthew 25:45) is a theme found throughout Scripture. God is not a passive bystander but a stalwart advocate who actively “pleads the cause” of those whom society renders voiceless and powerless (represented by “the poor” in vv. 22-23 and the “orphans” in 23:10-11).

It is significant that concern for the poor is placed at the head of this list of

30 sayings. Concern for the poor is not an option for the one who seeks to serve God.

Furthermore, the reference to those who would “rob” the poor or “crush” them at the “gate” of the city where the community’s system of justice was administered (v. 22) is a reminder that the poor and powerless suffer from unjust systems and structures, not merely at the hands of individuals.

Good company

A life lived wisely watches carefully the company one keeps. Wisdom recognizes the attitudes of the friends we choose easily “rub off on us,” and before we know it, we “learn their ways” (v. 25). This warning applies to anyone who lives contrary to God’s purposes, whether “hotheads” who cannot manage their anger appropriately (v. 24), “drunkards” and “gluttons” who overindulge (23:20-21), or “prostitutes” and “adulterers” who set traps for their prey (vv. 27-28).

Good attitudes

A life lived wisely is marked by integrity and humility. As God’s people, we are called not only to avoid the wrong company and to resist their temptations, but also to refuse to rejoice when our enemies fail (24:17) or fret with envy when they succeed (24:20, 23:17-18, 24:1-2). Jesus, of course, takes this advice even further, commanding us to love even our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

No excuses

Any frustrated parent can identify with my grandfather's rhetorical question after his advice went unheeded: "Did you think I was talking just so I could hear the sound of my own voice?"

The wise teaching of Proverbs ultimately means little if it goes unheard and unheeded. Furthermore, as Proverbs 24:12 reminds us, ignorance is no excuse. God has given us instructions for life. God has shown us the way to live. In the words of the hymn, we are now called to "trust and obey."

Discussion questions

- In the light of Proverbs' teaching about justice for the poor, consider the words of Henri Nouwen: "The poor make the church faithful to its vocation. When the church is no longer a church for the poor, it loses its spiritual identity. ... Those who are marginal in the world are central in the church, and that is how it is supposed to be. Thus we are called as members of the church to keep going to the margins of our society." How do you respond to Nouwen's assertions? In what ways are we called as God's people to go "to the margins of our society"? Whom will we find there?

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