

Part 21: An Exercise in Reading Proverbs

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We are continuing to work through our study in the book of Proverbs, but we are going to pick up the pace a little bit as we enter into the back half of the book.

We've seen the first nine chapters of Proverbs which were more of a cohesive unit displaying the weight and wonder of wisdom. But the further we've gotten from the prologue the more disjointed the Proverbs have become.

While there are some larger thought units ahead in the book, and we will slow down and examine those in detail, most of what is ahead of us seems like a Gatling gun of smaller proverbs fired towards us at an endless pace.

In his commentary on the book, Charles Bridges says that this second part of the book diverges from the first as Solomon helps us as the reader emerge from the state of youth to the state of adulthood. Another commentator said that in the earlier passages Solomon leveled with us by systematically walking us through how we think about God's word and our world. But this second portion makes us feel the way in which we encounter the need for wisdom today: at life speed.

Think of how you got up today and track how your brain processed things. Maybe you woke up and immediately wondered if you overslept or had enough time to get the kids dressed, or wondering if your exam is tomorrow. Then you remember to brush your teeth, but while brushing you notice that your face isn't as fit as it once looked and now you wonder when you're going to find time to work out and how that's going to affect your schedule with Community Group this week. While eating breakfast you notice that you've run out of milk and you need to go to the store but you also remember the larger grocery list you need but that it's also the end of the month and the budget is pretty tight at this point.

You roll into church just as the first song is finishing, and you spend the rest of the time wondering if you can pay attention with that kid making all that noise before you realize that kid might be your kid, and now you wonder if everyone around is annoyed at you.

The ever shifting pace of Proverbs matches the ever shifting pace of our life and it reminds us of the center principle which Solomon has given us throughout this book: That the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

If we want to make sense of life in this world we must learn to see the world through God's eyes. That's what wisdom is: seeing life through God's eyes. This means first that we submit ourselves to God's understanding, but it means second that we see God as faithful to us when we see how he has saved us.

Behind these Proverbs is not just the reality that God knows what's best, but that in Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom of God, we have the privilege of knowing the God who knows what's best. Which means in every sphere of life in which we encounter wisdom we encounter the sufficiency of God.

This is what the middle portion of Proverbs goes to show! God's faithfulness in Jesus shows us that he can redeem us from all of our sin, and God's wisdom in Jesus shows us that he can help us with all of our thoughts.

Each Proverb, of which there are over 800 in this book, is not a neatly packaged piece of advice. Each Proverb is a window into a world made possible when we really believe that God is faithful to us in Jesus.

Yet for us to spend adequate time on each Proverb would keep us in this book forever. So in light of this today's sermon is going to be a little different than the rest of the sermons we will preach. What I want to do today is to give us an exercise in how to read the Proverbs, while we won't cover every passage in this book, we should all learn how to read this book. We are going to take our next portion of scripture, which is Proverbs 13:20-14:13 and we are going to slow down and look at a bit of the truth that is packed in each proverb.

Proverbs read fast, but they think slow. So we are going to practice this slow thinking on the Proverbs today. There's not going to be an overarching theme to the sermon as we would normally have, but instead I want us to together practice what it feels like to consider the proverbs carefully.

We won't exhaust the nine Proverbs of our text today, but my goal is to open them enough that you can bookmark the ones that stood out most to you and go home and discuss them with your roommates or spouses.

With that said, we are going to dive into our first proverbs today: **Proverbs 13:20-21**.

My wife and I are big fans of true crime podcasts and documentaries and these verses prove what those often portray: that it doesn't matter how pure or naïve your intentions are, if you fall in with the wrong crowd you will be swept up in their problems.

Now I want to preface this by saying there is a difference between friendship with a sinner and having an intimate unguarded relationship with a fool. By God's grace Jesus came to befriend foolish sinners.

Jesus moved towards sinners, had mercy and compassion on sinners and expressed his love for sinners, but Jesus understood that he had the right view of the world and was able to remain uninfluenced in his actions by these sinners.

As we live with sinners and fools in our lives we need to be aware enough to see the places where our lives, our heart, and our actions are being influenced by their own foolishness. When we build our lives around the hopes and loves of their live, it will be to our own harm.

Why? Verse 21 answers that. Being a companion of a fool hurts not because the fool is in himself a nefarious criminal, but because disaster follows sinners. What a bitter sweet hope. Bitter in that sin leads to pain, but hopeful in that God actually wishes to preserve you from it!

This is why Solomon calls us to walk with the wise so that we might share not in disaster but in their good!

I think this proverb is particularly helpful for those of us in here who are younger or in school. School is a rare place where due to necessity or scarcely you are often faced with the choice of spending your time with those who are foolish. That is those who find joy in what the Bible here says leads to disaster. Pursuing those relationships whether you're in Jr. High, High School, College or at a continuing-ed conference is dangerous to your lively hood!

Instead what would it look like for you to walk with the wise? Before you look out into the church or your community group first look to Jesus. For we have the wisest of all men to look at, and more than that he has called us to follow him! What does walking with Jesus look like in your life? You can walk with the wisest of all men but to not walk with Jesus is to miss the reward of his good which comes by grace through faith.

Our next group of proverbs gets at a theme which we will spend more time unpacking next week. Read with me **Proverbs 13:22-23**.

Have you ever seen those pictures where at first glance it appears to be two old ladies looking at each other, but the longer you spend looking at it you see a rabbit? These two verses are kind of like that, and that's why Proverbs is so beautiful.

Here we do see a bit of financial wisdom here. The sinner is completely unconcerned with passing down financial wealth to those who come beyond him. Maybe he is concerned for his own children, but to think how his spending habits and finances could benefit his grandkids is completely out of sight.

But a good person sees how wise financial habits could leave a legacy of help to others. This could look as simple as trying not to leave gratuitous amounts of debt when you die, or to actually thinking about how you might put money away for future generations.

I know over the course of our building fund we have had a handful of donations given out of inheritance money from a grandparent or loved one. In some cases the person who passed away might not have even known our church, but here not only are the grandchildren blessed, but the grandchildren have shared that blessing with a whole group of people in the church. What a beautiful picture of this proverb!

But as we read verses 22 and 23 we realize that there is more to this than meets the eye. Solomon says the sinner leaves their wealth to the righteous, which doesn't quite make sense until we read verse 23: "The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away by injustice."

This verse on its own seems devastating in its reality. Here the poor man has a field which he plowed and tilled, and cared for, a field ripe to grow the very fruits he needs to survive. But in though injustice it is robbed from him. He gets no fruit from it.

This story makes us think of Naboth's vineyard in 2 Kings 21. Naboth was an ordinary citizen who had a beautiful vineyard outside the gates of Samaria. But the King of Israel, Ahaz, wanted that field. When Naboth refused to sell the field to Ahaz, Ahaz' wife abused the power of the throne, had Naboth murdered and Ahaz got his vineyard.

Today, more than we have in years, our world aches at the stories of injustice we often here. While we ought to fight for justice wherever we have the influence, we also know that the prevalence of injustice is something which we cannot escape.

But this is where we see the full picture of these two verses. Injustice exists and it is a painful perversion of God's ideal world. But look at verse 22, in the end the wealth gained by injustice will once more belong to the righteous.

For a world that cries for justice, the God of justice stands as the answer to all our hopes. One day the all that the wicked gain through deceit and oppression will be taken from them and given to the righteous. What they gained in this life will be their death in the end.

Doesn't this give us hope as we encounter injustice and as we labor for justice? Even justice at a human level is not true justice, but one day there will be true justice!

Our hope as we try to uphold justice in the spheres of life you have a responsibility in is that one day justice will flow like a river. But more than that, if you are really concerned about justice, then you yourself must realize that you are part of the problem. Jesus shared a parable in Matthew 21 where he himself was the rightful owner of a beautiful vineyard, but when he went to gather his fruit, the servants murdered him to take the fruit for themselves.

Justice is an issue of worship. To rob God of worship is to sweep away for yourself what belongs to him. But the same Jesus who was killed, was killed so that those who are guilty might be declared innocent.

If you want justice, then come and stand in Christ.

Our next parable is a snapshot into the heart of parenting: **Proverbs 13:24**.

This is a good exercise in slowing down and reading. Often when we read Proverbs on parenting we think of it as being applied directly to the behavior of the child. We think of passages like Proverbs 22:6, "train a child in the way he should go and he will not depart from it."

But what's not to be missed here, is that when we slow down, we realize this passage is less about the conformity of the child and more about the heart of the parent.

On display is a heart which hates their child, and a heart which loves them. How are you to discern your own heart? By judging your own posture in discipline.

Even more to the point the parent who loves their child is diligent to discipline him. In other words the parent is also being placed under discipline here. Just as an athlete's discipline is meant to make him diligent in those clutch moments. So too are parents to be diligent in discipline.

How do we know what this look like? How is this applicable even to those who have no children?

Hebrews 12:5-6. We see how God disciplines us, and in seeing that we see the way in which he loves us and wants to protect us.

We see how even the painful moments of this life are not beyond God's love for us! But we also see that God's discipline is not sporadic, but consistent. God's discipline is not done in anger or by things which simply annoyed him. God disciplines firmly and that which is truly sinful.

How many of us discipline our children but do so without the diligence that God uses to discipline us? It was a lot harder for Christ to come from heaven to earth than it was for you to put down your phone and care for what is dangerous in the life of your children, but that's the kind of diligent love Jesus had for us.

Our next proverb picks up on a theme we've encountered a lot in the book: **Proverbs 13:25-14:1**.

Social scientists call this the hedonistic treadmill. Just as on a treadmill you are always running but never getting anywhere, so too is the perception of fulfillment in this world. You're always trying to be filled by something, but it never happens. There's always another object behind the object you just consumed.

The prophet Isaiah picks this up too when talking about his own contemporaries: **Isaiah 9:20**.

People are eating and eating the fruit of their own wickedness in Israel and yet they are never satisfied. But those who trust in God's righteous provision for them in the gospel are satisfied.

Why? Proverbs 14:1, the wisest woman builds a house, but a foolish one tears it down with her own hands.

Here we run into the theme of the two women again in the book of Proverbs: Lady Folly and Lady Wisdom.

To walk in the way of Lady Wisdom, is to trust that God and God alone knows what's best for you. That in sending his son to die for your sins you really can trust that he is able to care for you. By walking through life obeying his word you're walking in a house built to withstand life's demands.

But to follow Lady Folly, is to labor hard to try and build satisfaction and joy by our own effort. She will cheer you on saying, "Yes, find it here! Spend for it here! Compromise for it here!" But all the while you are working, she is tearing down what little you've already built.

A great application of this proverb is to look back at your life and assess what sin has actually built for you. Where has trusting in pleasure on your own terms actually provided it in an enduring way? Where is the house of safety and peace you thought you had built?

Our next proverb shares a similar tone but presents it in a new profound way: **Proverbs 14:2**.

Here is something really important for us to understand: How we act is first and foremost a reflection of what we believe.

When we read Proverbs it's easy to skip to the part that says, "Tell me how to act." But how we act starts with what we fear. Application begins with a fear of the Lord.

We've defined "fear of the Lord" as a reverent reliance upon God. That means that the key to Proverbs is understanding that not only do we need to rely on God, but that God is worthy to be relied upon.

Our posture towards walking in wisdom and walking in foolishness is unmasked here as your posture towards the trustworthiness of God displayed in Jesus. Wisdom is not about intellect or problem solving, wisdom is about your heart towards God.

You see just as devastating as it is to see that sin never fills you, it is equally as fearful to choose to say no to the tangible aspects of sin and say yes to the invisible hope of the gospel.

But in our conversion we have the sign of God's faithfulness in our heart. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is there with us encouraging us, reminding our hearts that God is faithful, that obedience is often costly but God's pleasure and salvation is never ending. Without Jesus we will always be devious by turning away from righteousness because it seems dangerous to our self-interest. But with Jesus we are wooed by God's amazing love for us for we have seen his goodness in our salvation.

Next is **Proverbs 14:3**.

We aren't going to spend much time on this because it's pretty self-evident. Your mouth might get you into a lot of trouble if you're not careful. But to be wise with your mouth is to be delivered from a lot.

How many times can we commit to things too quickly that we ought not have committed to? How many times do we pledge a promise of something we ought not to have pledged? How many times have we said something which we could not in that moment take back? How many of us have placed our foot square in our mouth because we were trying to be funny?

What might the hope be for us who all do this? It is not only to watch our mouth, but to use our mouths to seek forgiveness from those we have wronged and to repent with our mouths to God himself. If we are ones quick to talk, let us also be those who are quick to seek forgiveness and repentance.

Our next verse is my favorite today: **Proverbs 14:4**.

Proverbs are timely for any time, but this one is wonderful hope for us today.

What's the point of the proverb? A clean manger shows really well, but if your ox doesn't eat neither will you.

In other words: What's most fruitful is not what's most photogenic. We live in a world which values the pretty and the put together but God values fruitfulness over it all.

I'm going to talk to men here in a moment, but I do want to talk to the ladies in here for a second because I think for good and bad reasons this is a burden many of you live under. But a house filled with a mess of people is better in the eyes of the Lord than a house that's pristine without people.

The manger is where the oxen eat. If our kitchen is messy because we are doing the work of feeding kids and hosting your neighbors, God is not at all disappointed in you. So what if you don't look like Joanna Gaines? Guess what, hospitality, discipleship, care for one another, raising kids, all of it makes a mess. But praise God that Jesus got messy for us.

He lived in heaven in the pristine absence of all filth and the place of organizational dreams, but he came into our chaos to love us, to care for us, and ultimately to die for us.

Now there are ways in which a messy house, or a kitchen which is unsanitary might actually be a hindrance to fruitfulness and loving others. But if having a picturesque or clean house is what's holding you back from engaging in the work of loving others, you might be prioritizing the wrong things.

This is not just a female problem. This applies to all of us in different ways. For me, my manger is my yard. I love mowing my lawn, trimming my lawn, whispering sweet nothings to my lawn. But I will admit (and I every fiber in my being doesn't want to admit this to my church or to my wife) that there are times where I have chosen the appearance of my lawn to the detriment of serving my family.

There are times where the lawn might need to wait a few extra days and those tight lawnmower lines might fade in order for me to bring relief to my wife and care to my kids. There might be times where the adventure which will show well on Instagram or the hunt which will score well in the record books might need to wait in order to produce fruitfulness to God in other areas.

But as disruptive as this might be, there is immense hope for all of us in this text because it provides the affirmation of God instead of the affirmation of the world. We might not be affirmed by the standards of the culture, but we will have been faithful in the eyes of God and in that God is pleased with you.

Our next few verses deal with the reality of truth in the context of relationships. Read with me: **Proverbs 14:5-12.**

So these is the longest thought unit of the day, and it builds on itself in two parts. In verses 5-8 we are meant to desire a relationship with a wise man in contrast to that of a fool. A wise man tells the truth, a man of understanding has good knowledge, the prudent is able to discern his way. But the fool can't do any of this. He can't know what's good in his own life let alone in your life.

As creatures made in the image of God we are relational creatures made to be influenced through relationships. When you think of those relationships closest to you, are the ones which influence your heart and your hopes those done from a perspective of God's wisdom or the world's wisdom?

Actually the grammar behind verse seven might actually imply that the longer you listen to the fool the less likely you yourself will be to hear wisdom for yourself. It actually dulls our ears.

This is what highlights the problem in verses 9-12. Why is it important to ask yourself these questions about your relationships? Because behind the relationships you have in your life is your proximity to hope.

Look again at **Proverbs 14:9-12.**

Don't we see in this passage the harsh reality that this world will not understand our hope? Here this is displayed in fools mocking, laughing at us, when we recognize the need for our sin to be dealt with.

The world says your heart is the key to your own satisfaction, but the Bible says our hearts are the keys to our problem. Follow your heart says the world, and you'll find joy. But there is a way that seems right to man but in the end it leads to death.

More over even as the world seems to live free from the burden of sin, in the midst of their laughter their heart may ache. They might be distracting themselves with the pleasures of the world because they actually are afraid to stop and ponder what the silence of life might cause them to consider.

Verse 10 is a striking verse when it comes to our experience in a world like this: "The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares in its joy."

Here is the two fold problem. One: As Christians we know our hearts are wicked. Two: Even though we know that Jesus died to save us from our sins, the world refuses to acknowledge what joy that comes from that. There is therefore a compounding hopelessness! The world finds us foolish for being burdened by our sin, and therefore the world cannot rejoice with us at our deliverance.

But as we consider this idea we long for friends of faithful witness, we long for those who seek to discern their way according to God's path. We desire those who lift our heads when we are weak and rejoice in the joy of redemption. In short this life is a brutal place without the church.

Wisdom might seem like something you need to apply on your own, but wisdom is corporate. We need each other because life in this world wages war against our joy. But in the church, we help each other see what the world tries to dull.

Brothers and sisters as we seek to apply the slow thoughts of Proverbs to our own hearts, let us labor diligently to apply the same hope to the hearts of others! Why? So that we might share in each other's joy.

As we slow down to consider the book of Proverbs I pray that we become encouragers of each other. As Proverbs shapes all of our life, our church life should begin to change too. There's nothing more transformative than finding Jesus faithful in every sphere of our lives.