

Proverbs 1:1-7

Everyday Wisdom: Why Proverbs?

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If you had to choose one proverb to live your life by, what would it be? Would it be?

1. “If you want something done right, do it yourself.” Maybe you’re all about individual responsibility and high quality work. Or how about?
2. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” That’s the golden rule, right? That seems like a pretty good proverb to live by. Or maybe you’ve heard this one?
3. “Good things come to those who wait.” I don’t think I would recommend choosing that one even if that one proves to be true. Some of you may know someone who would choose this proverb.
4. “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.” On the other side some of you may be thinking...
5. “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” By the way. This is not a Bible verse. Some believe...
6. “Fortune favors the bold.” But others think...
7. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”¹

What if you choose a proverb from the Bible? Would you live your life by one of those?

Proverbs 15:22

Plans fail for lack of counsel,
but with many advisers they succeed. (NIV)

That one tells us its good to get advice from many people before going forward with your plans. How about?

Proverbs 16:9

The heart of man plans his way,
but the Lord establishes his steps. (ESV)

Making this one your **life-proverb** would bolster your confidence in God, wouldn’t it? But there are other proverbs that might not make so much sense.

Proverbs 16:33

The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is from the Lord. (NIV)

So should Christians always **pick straws** to make decisions? Proverbs are **generally true but not true all the time**. For example the saying “many hands make light work” is a type of proverb. That’s often true. The more people that chip in on a job the faster it usually goes. But what if those hands belong to **babies**? Then many hands make more and more work. So we should never read a proverb as a **universal truth** but try to understand the **general truth** it is trying to communicate to us. If we don’t they can really **confuse** us.

Proverbs 26:9

Like a thornbush in a drunkard’s hand
is a proverb in the mouth of a fool. (NIV)

Has anyone ever **quoted** a proverb **at you** instead of for you? Proverbs can hurt. It's easy to **misapply** them. But I believe **there is a Proverb** in this book that God is calling us to live by and it's one that is always good all the time. As I **begin** to tell you about that Proverb I have four questions I want us to answer. **1) What is a proverb? 2) Why Proverbs? 3) Who is Proverbs for? 4) What's the big idea of Proverbs?** So first...

1. What is a proverb? (v1)

The first seven verses of the book of Proverbs are a **preamble**. Preamble is not a word I use very often but it means an **introductory remark** or **opening statement**. So the book of Proverbs introduces itself and explains what a proverb is in the first seven verses. It starts like this...

Proverbs 1:1

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: (NIV)

The word "proverb" comes from the Hebrew word "**mashal**" and means "**a short, pithy saying**" that's "**easy to remember**."² The exact same word in Hebrew can also mean "to rule" or "govern" so you get the idea that proverbs are short, pithy, statements we use to rule or govern our lives. So with that in mind I'd like to propose this definition of what a Proverb is.

Proverbs are brief poetic sayings meant to teach us wisdom.

Have you ever heard someone say something that was both **brief** and **poetic** and you thought, "Wow, that was really good!" I short clip went viral recently with **Keanu Reeves** and **Stephen Colbert**. Colbert was interviewing **Keanu Reeves**, the star of the **Matrix**, and he asked him. "What do you think happens when we die, Keanu Reeves?" Keanu **sat back**, took a **deep breath in and out**, and said, "**I know that the ones who love us will miss us.**" To which Stephen Colbert **shook his hand**. What he said sounded like a Proverb. It was **short, poetic, and meaningful**.

But Proverbs are God's word and they have something **special** to teach us—**wisdom**. The Hebrew word for **wisdom**—"hokmah"—at its most basic level means "**the skill of living**."³ But it's not just any kind of living, like living for the weekend or for my bank account or for my family, it's **living for God**. It's living the way he **designed** us to live. Wisdom is living a life that **honors God** every day in every part of our life.

Wisdom is knowing how to have a good **marriage**, which God said we can have if we do it his way. Wisdom is knowing how to be a good **parent** in a way that honors God and is good for your child. Wisdom is using your **money thoughtfully** and **fairly** whether you're **rich** or **poor**. Wisdom is a **politician** or **government official** who governs justly and won't let those with the **money and power** make the rules. Wisdom is knowing **the right thing to say** and **when to say it** and **how to say it**. Wisdom is a **business owner** who creates a **high-quality product** and **treats her employees and customers** well. Wisdom helps us **navigate** the big important **high-stakes** decisions, but also the **normal choices** we encounter **everyday**.

Verse one attributes **these first Proverbs** to **king Solomon** son of David. David was the most famous king of Israel and he made his son Solomon king at an early age. When he became king Solomon offered a great sacrifice to the Lord, "a thousand burnt offerings" (1 Kings 3:4b). Then God appeared to Solomon in a **dream** and asked him what he could give him.

Because he was young he asked God to give him wisdom to **rule** over God's people Israel. That **pleased** God so much so that he gives him wisdom and discernment but also wealth and honor (1 Kings 3:1-15). And then right after this the Bible tells a story **demonstrating Solomon's wisdom**. Two **women** appeared before Solomon fighting over a baby. One woman had **rolled** on her own baby during the night and **accidentally**

killed it, and she had stolen the other woman's baby to be her own. But of course she **denied** the **accusation**. How was Solomon to know which woman was right? They didn't have **DNA** tests back then.

He tells his soldiers to bring him a **sword** and he says to cut the baby in half and give one half to each woman. The **real mother** says, "No! Don't kill him. Give her the baby" but the **fake** says, "Cut him in two!" And that's how Solomon figured it out. The real mom would never say such a thing (1 Kings 3:16-28). God had given Solomon **supernatural wisdom**, and now **through** the book of Proverbs you and I have an **opportunity** to receive **supernatural wisdom** for our lives too. We can learn "**The skill of living (for God)**" in our **everyday lives**.

2. Why Proverbs? (v2-4)

Why did I choose Proverbs for us? When I was growing up almost every night **my dad** would come into our **boys' dormitory**, sit on the side of my bed, and he would **pray** that God would give us "wisdom." You may have heard recently that the **President** dropped by a big church outside of Washington DC for prayer. That was the church I used to go to when I lived in Falls Church Virginia. And what did the Pastor pray for the President? He prayed for wisdom. It doesn't matter if you're a child or the President of the United States. We all need wisdom—we all need to know how to live our life the way God **designed** it.

In verses 2-6 Proverbs gives us its **purpose-statement**. It tells us **why** Solomon and the **other authors** we'll encounter later in the book **compiled** this book of wisdom sayings.

Proverbs 1:2-4

- 2 for gaining wisdom and instruction;
for understanding words of insight;
- 3 for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,
doing what is right and just and fair;
- 4 for giving prudence to those who are simple,
knowledge and discretion to the young— (NIV)

We read and study Proverbs **in order to gain wisdom**. Verses 2-4 **expand** our understanding of what wisdom is by using similar words that **broaden** its **definition** and add **depth**.

- **Instruction (muwsar)**

When we think of instruction we think of going to class, but this word has a serious tone to it. It can mean **discipline**, **correction**, or **punishment**. This instruction can include **verbal rebukes** (Prov 12:1) or **physical punishment** (Prov 13:24).⁴ Like, "My **boss** gave me firm instruction on how I was wrong" or "my dad instructed me with a **swift punishment**." **Why** Proverbs? Even though it's **never fun** sometimes we **need correction** and the book of Proverbs **offers** us that correction.

- **Understanding (biyn)**

This word "describes a depth of knowledge beyond mere awareness..."⁵ You perceive it. You discern it. See, I understand how to use a tape measure, and hammer, and nails, but my level of understanding is pretty **shallow**. But if you ask someone like Bruce how to use a tape measure, and hammer, and nails, he can show you a whole lot more because of his years of **construction experience**. **Why** Proverbs? We don't want to be shallow people. We want to get it, we want to have a **deep understanding of how life works**.

- **Knowledge (da'at)**

This means “to know.” Wisdom is not the **exact** same thing as **knowledge** or **intelligence**. It can **include** those things, but you don’t have to have a **high IQ** to be wise. You can be great at **Jeopardy** but a **horrible person**. Having a high IQ means you’re great at doing math and thinking logically but that doesn’t mean you know how to **live life God’s way**. Wisdom is more like having a high **EQ, emotional intelligence**.⁶ You might not have the **largest intellect** in the room but if you recognize and understand your **own emotions**, don’t let your emotions **control you**, and you can **recognize** what others are **feeling** and **empathize** with them, then you have a high EQ. EQ not IQ is more like wisdom. Wisdom does require knowledge of situations and people but you don’t have to be a genius to be wise.

As a church we can have all the **Bible knowledge** in the world but if we don’t know how to put it **into practice** in our **everyday lives** then we’re **missing the point**. If we know lot’s of **Bible trivia** but aren’t **worshipping God** and **developing a relationship** with him or **growing as disciples** or if we’re not **loving our neighbor** or **caring for the least of these** then we’re **missing the point**. Paul warns us in the **New Testament** “... **knowledge puffs up while love builds up**” (1 Cor 8:1). Everything we learn about God should go right into practice. **Why** proverbs? Because we want the knowledge necessary to **act wisely**. What **other words** describe wisdom?

- **Righteousness (sedeq), justice (mispal), and fairness (mesarim)**⁷

When you understand how to live life God’s way, when you have the knowledge to do it, and when you have friends and family who are willing to **correct** you, the outcome is going to be **right, just, and fair**. There’s a **social aspect** to wisdom. Wisdom helps me treat my neighbor, coworker, and family members with **respect** and **dignity**. Wisdom helps me **save thoughtfully** but also **give generously** to the **poor** and **homeless** (Prov 11:24-25). Wisdom helps me **look beyond myself to the needs of others**. **Why** proverbs? It helps us get past **surface-level** knowledge to real depth and it helps us love our neighbors **well**.

3. Who is Proverbs for? (v4-6)

A better way of asking this question is, “**Who is wisdom for?**” Do you want wisdom? If you do, if you honestly truly want to know how to live life the way **God intends**, then Proverbs is for you.

Proverbs 1:4-6

- 4 for giving prudence to those who are simple,
knowledge and discretion to the young—
- 5 let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance—
- 6 for understanding proverbs and parables,
the sayings and riddles of the wise.

Proverbs is for everyone. It casts a **wide net**. If you’re **simple**, so neither **foolish** nor **wise**, then Proverbs is for you. If you’re **young**—in the first nine chapters it’s written like a father giving advice to his **son** (he says “my son” over and over again)—so if you’re a **teenager** or **young adult, guy** or **girl**, Proverbs is for you. Or if you are **wise already**, if you are already **discerning**, so discerning you have your own **genre of wisdom** (A Bernieism or something...), Proverbs is for you. Proverbs is for everyone.

4. What’s the big idea of Proverbs? (v7)

Now at the end of the **preamble** (introduction) we find the **key-verse** for the **whole of Proverbs**. It’s a verse that’s **theme** is going to come up again and again throughout Proverbs, “the fear of the Lord.”

Proverbs 1:7

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

If you had to **choose one proverb to live your whole life by**, I'd hope that this would be it. **Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord.** What does it mean to fear the Lord? Dr. Bruce Waltke says, "You really believe his **promises** are **secure** and his **threats** are **real**." You **believe in God** (Psalm 19:1) and you take his **words** in the **Scriptures seriously** (Psalm 19:7-9). You understand that God **designed** the world a certain way and that if you live life that way it will **go well for you** but if you disobey there will be **consequences**. Another **defined** it as "**reverent obedience**."⁸

It's not just fear and reverence of **any god**. It's a fear of **our God**. Do you see in your Bible how "**LORD**" is in **upper case**? That's signaling that this is **God's special covenant name**, "**Yahweh**." That's a name he gave his people **Israel** to **identify** him. So this is **fear** and **reverence** but it's based on **relationship**. It's like the fear a **young boy** has of his **loving father**. He knows if he does **something wrong** his Father will **correct him** but he also knows that his same father **wouldn't hesitate** to **lay down his life for him**. I don't know which strikes more fear in a young boy's heart, the **correction** or the **potential sacrifice**.

As we think about the **God of the whole Bible** we remember that he too will **correct** us when we need it but he has **already laid down a life**, the **life of his Son Christ Jesus for us**. That should strike fear—a **reverent awe**—in our hearts. **Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord.**

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes further endnotes and references. Click to listen to sermons or to read our story.⁹

¹ The 50 most important English proverbs. PhraseMix. <https://www.phrasemix.com/collections/the-50-most-important-english-proverbs> Accessed 6/13/2019.

² *Mounce's Expository Dictionary*. Accordance Bible Software. H5442

³ *How to Read Proverbs* by Tremper Longman III. Page 14.

⁴ *How to Read Proverbs* by Tremper Longman III. Page 16.

⁵ *Mounce's Expository Dictionary*. Old Testament: Understand.

⁶ *How to Read Proverbs* by Tremper Longman III. Page 15.

⁷ They describe actions that are right (sedeq), just (mispat), and fair (mesarim). These are ethical terms, and as we read on we will see that one cannot possess them without wisdom—nor wisdom without righteousness, justice and virtue. In other words, wisdom in Proverbs is an ethical quality. The wise are on the side of the good. *How to Read Proverbs* by Tremper Longman III. Page 17.

⁸ *The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 15: Proverbs*. Proverbs 1:7.

⁹ All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.