

For Children — Proverbs 1-4, Luke 18:15-17



Henry Ossawa Tanner, Christ and His Mother Studying

Both Proverbs and Christ emphasize the importance of children. Proverbs tells children to listen to instruction. Christ tells us to receive instruction from the example of childlike humility and trust. Proverbs begins with warm, wise and affectionate appeals to the author's child, reiterated at least ten times in these four chapters. The book encourages parents raising children to follow God.

We are encouraged that our children will be free, God will be their refuge, they will be blessed, and they will continue on the right path as they grow older.

For parents, it is important to remember how responsible we are to teach our children wisdom. Proverbs is an encouragement that God values common sense, wants us to develop it, and wants us to pass it on to our children. It's a book where spirituality has its feet firmly planted on the ground in ordinary daily life.

Christ added his own proverbs in the form of the Beatitudes. They parallel things we are taught in the book of Proverbs: both call us to humility, to mourn, to be meek and uncontrolling, to desire righteousness, to be merciful, to focus on God, to

make peace, and to be strong enough to take opposition. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes wisdom from Proverbs and re-presents it. If we can model these things and so pass them on to our children, we will have done well.

But most importantly, Christian parents teach their children that forgiveness of sins are available from Christ when we confess them, and that when we turn to him in humble repentance, we become his forever children.

Did I receive instruction in wisdom from my family or other mentors? Am I passing on the wisdom I have gained through life?

Lady Wisdom — Proverbs 5-9, Colossians 2:3



Henry Ossawa Tanner, Women from the French West Indies

Proverbs prefigures Christ as the wisdom of God. He is metaphorically identified as a woman, Lady Wisdom, who participated in creation, sustains us, and calls us to listen and gain the treasures she has to offer. Wisdom is said to be the first thing created and a lyrical exposition of the process of creation follows, thus linking wisdom even more closely to the person of Christ.

In addition to Lady Wisdom, there are two more women, one foolish and one wise. A foolish woman is described at the beginning of the book who destroys men's lives, seducing with no consciousness or repentance of doing wrong. The foolish woman is dangerous, whereas wisdom is compared to a sister, a public speaker and a gracious

hostess who welcomes people to her home. In contrast, the foolish woman invites people into her home and serves them death. The book ends with the image of a wise woman who loves her husband and children, cares well for her household, is diligent with her money/food/clothing/crafts/decor, generous to those who are poor, and who teaches with kindness and wisdom.

In observing immoral women who fit the foolish profile as well as those who fall into their traps, I have concluded they act out of their own woundedness. This does not excuse the destruction they bring, nor minimize that their behavior leads to death. But Christ showed particular compassion for "fallen" women, and called them to transformation. Obviously we want to heed these warnings and avoid messy, destructive relationships, but if we or others fail, repentance is always possible.

We do not always show wisdom in how we analyze situations or people. Christ's wisdom can be found in men and women very different from us, from far away places, and far away times. His wisdom is not confined by gender, race or economics, and we need to always be looking for lady wisdom in those we meet.

Am I committed to being the wisest person I can be?

Wisdom versus Foolishness — Proverbs 10-15, Matthew 7:24-26



Marc Chagall, The Wisdom of Solomon

This section identifies itself as Proverbs of Solomon, the King who asked God for wisdom and was granted “a wise and understanding mind such as no one else has ever had or ever will have!” (I Kings 3:12). We are told that “he composed some 3,000 proverbs and wrote 1,005 songs. He could speak with authority about all kinds of plants, from the great cedar of Lebanon to the tiny hyssop that grows from cracks in a wall. He could also speak about animals, birds, reptiles, and fish. And kings from every nation sent their ambassadors to listen to the wisdom of Solomon.” (I Kings 4:32-34)

But as his life continued, he became a foolish man, indulging himself with an extensive harem of woman who led him into idolatry. He did not follow the advice contained here to fear God.

Christ contrasts the wise and the foolish as those who follow him versus those who do not. For example, the wise and foolish builders mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount, the wise and foolish virgins waiting for the wedding, or foolish Pharisaical teaching versus his wisdom. One of his parables concludes that a person is foolish to value wealth over a relationship with God.

This section of Proverbs sets up a similar opposition between the wise and the foolish. The series of wise sayings do not seem to come in any particular order, though nearly 300 themes have been identified. As one reads through, we enter a rhythm of contrasts between someone wise and foolish, generous or stingy, joyful or angry, diligent or lazy, just versus unjust, using words to bless or using words to hurt, accepting reproof, or ignoring it. A pattern builds up in the mind of a thoughtful, kind, and gracious character, which is the outcome of living in wisdom.

As I think about people I know who exemplify wisdom, they are thoughtful, do not rush to insist on their opinions but are very good listeners, and look for ways to help others on every level. Their words are kind, their actions are kind, and they take for granted they are not the center of the world. My desire is to assimilate the advice of Proverbs and the example of wise people and to be such a person myself.

These chapters contain half of Proverb's references to the kind of words that bring healing: wise, kind, positive, and reliable words. Good news brings good health, and Christ not only brought the good news, he exemplified this healing speech. My commitment is to become a person whose words help to heal our hurting world.

Where do I seem to have foolish weaknesses at this point in my life?

Wisdom's Humility — Proverbs 16-21, Matthew 11:25



Sieger Köder, The Washing of Feet

Christ calls us to humility, and Proverbs emphasizes that humility and fear of God are the beginning of wisdom. In this section the teaching is not by way of contrast, but is rather a calling to a godly life. Christ explained humility with a call for us to become as little children.

C.S. Lewis wisely wrote: “Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him*. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.”

Humility is not particularly admired in our culture. We seem to prefer strong, aggressive personalities who are willing to promote themselves, so the counter-cultural call to not place ourselves above others is one we particularly need. The antidote to pride in our successes is gratitude, and the antidote to depression over our failures is humility. It helps to recognize the limits to our ability or responsibility to manage our lives or the lives of others. We are neither omnipotent or omniscient. We make mistakes. We need to allow the Holy Spirit to give us humble repentance and dependence as a constant in our lives.

Christ told us and demonstrated for us that humble service of others is the way to best please him. Our heart as we serve others can be a measure for us of how we are doing.

How do I think of humility? What brings humility into my life?

Wisdom's Rewards — Proverbs 22-24, James 1:5, 25



Maximino Cerezo Barredo, Cristo Resucitado

Both Proverbs and Christ tell us that obedience to the call of wisdom results in rewards. In Proverbs we are given a trilogy of rewards for true humility and fear of the Lord: riches, honor, and long life.

If we seek these things in a worldly way, our passion for riches opens up obsession with material things, work out of balance, and even lying and stealing. The

opposite error can be a poverty mentality that expects nothing, and becomes lazy or discouraged. Instead, in Christ, we receive and give all the gifts of life.

Seeking honor in the world creates pride in our accomplishments, the illusions of fame, attention, and approval from others, or we can be overly low in our self-esteem, expecting and getting abuse and put-downs. In Christ, his ways of honoring us do not bring pride, but delight and appreciation.

The wrong approach to long life can be an obsession with self-care, overly focused on exercise, food, and our looks. The opposite error is to ignore these things and be careless, with resulting bad health. The balance of God is a life appreciative of his gifts. One lives in peace with less stress which results in better health, constantly turning all our concerns over to him.

Christ himself sacrificed riches, honor, and long life on earth for the much greater gain of having these things after death. He now owns all things, is the highest of all, and has eternal life. He may call us to make similar choices in our lives today for the sake of advancing his Kingdom, as for example, all of the apostles, including Paul, so clearly did. We see from their example it is well worth it in the long run.

What is my perspective on riches, honor, and long life?

Criticism — Proverbs 25-29, Matthew 7:1-2



Édouard Manet, Jesus Mocked by the Soldiers

Solomon's proverbs collected by King Hezekiah's advisers include the topic of giving and receiving criticism. Christ also warned us to criticize with wisdom and without falling into the trap of condemnation. A distinction can be made between honestly complaining to another person about their behavior and negotiating a solution, versus communicating that we think someone else is inadequate as a person.

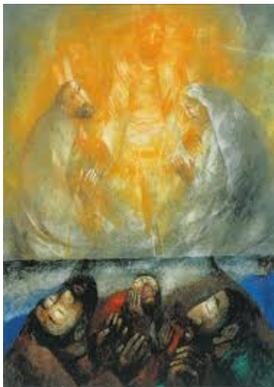
Proverbs on this tell us to treasure valid criticism, that an open rebuke is better than hidden love, that wounds from a friend are better than kisses from an enemy. Unfair criticism does not necessarily land on its victim. But stubbornly refusing to accept criticism can result in being hopelessly broken. Christ is our example in not collapsing under unfair criticism. His willingness to poke at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees shows us that offering criticism when needed is wise as well.

Many of us live under the delusion that receiving a critique is a tragedy, and that offering criticism is cruel. Proverbs tells us and Christ shows us that this is not so. Giving and receiving criticism can be a very good thing, a valuable resource for growth. My best efforts in giving criticism have involved thinking through when to say something and how to be tactful, and preparing not to panic if I get a bad reaction. My best efforts in receiving it have been to listen appreciatively, apologize if need be, and take myself lightly enough not to be defensive. With this perspective criticism becomes a great gift, another way for God to speak to us.

Have I learned to give and receive criticism in a healthy helpful way?

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Christ our Wisdom — Proverbs 30, Acts 1:11



Sieger Köder, Transfiguration

Agur son of Jakeh offers a beautiful prophetic word about Christ: “Who but God goes up to heaven and comes back down? Who holds the wind in his fists? Who wraps up the oceans in his cloak? Who has created the whole wide world? What is his name—and his son’s name? Tell me if you know!”

Agur humbly says he has not mastered human wisdom nor knows the Holy One. He comments on his weariness, ignorance, and lack of common sense. There is something deeply ironic here. Solomon's proverbs often sound like he has it all together and yet we know that his life fell apart—pride and idolatry led to a fall. In contrast, Agur gives us a clear vision of Christ and the promise that God's word is reliable.

Among other pieces of advice, he uses the rhetorical device “there are three things, no four.” We are given five sets of four things that offer insights on dissatisfaction, amazement, unfortunate events, things small but wise, and things that are stately.

The answer to Agur's question, of course, is Christ. He is the one who ascends and will return. He holds the winds and the oceans and created the whole world with the Father. He is the father's son. He is even the reliable word of God. He defends all who come to him for protection.

When I am puzzled on what to think or what to do or what to feel, knowing that Christ is the source of all wisdom pulls me back to look to him for the answers. The result is peace and hope and even good ideas on what to do.

Do I look to Christ when I need wisdom?

A Wise Woman — Proverbs 31, I Peter 3:4



Bernard de Hoog, Mother with child holding doll

Christ's character can be expressed through an ordinary housewife who allows him to make her extraordinary. In the beginning of the book wisdom was identified with a woman and contrasted with a foolish, immoral woman. At the end of the book we

are introduced to a wife and mother who exemplifies wisdom in her particular context of caring for home and family. Her qualities of character abstracted out of her activities can equally well be seen as qualities of the character of Christ.

These include: being valuable, trustworthy, creative, a provider, strong, observant, hard-working, caring for those who are poor, giving honor, peaceful, instructing with wisdom, and worthy of praise.

An acrostic, this is a “wise woman from A to Z.” Women sometimes read about her and think, “I cannot measure up.” The lesson is that by allowing Christ to change us we uniquely become what he envisioned for us to be. The poem also helps men notice the talents and wisdom of women in their lives. The secret of her excellence and foundation from which her accomplishments emerge is given at the end: she fears God.

Since so many young women are single and might get an inferiority complex reading about this wife and mother, or since wives and mothers might look at her with some anxiety and envy, we need to remember this is an example, and not the only one. What matters is that our character emerges from our fear of God and our particular calling. The Hebrew scriptures place Proverbs right before Ruth, which means one goes from reading about a great woman in the abstract to a specific stellar example. Her life was not without tragedy, but she moved through it to become part of the line of Christ, a great and valuable person.

Is Christ making me the uniquely valuable person he wants me to be?