

**COMMONSENSE RELIGION**  
**A DEVOTIONAL JOURNEY THROUGH**  
**PROVERBS**

**BY**

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## 1. Listen and Learn

*Let the wise listen and add to their learning...* (Proverbs 1:5).

Many of us do more speaking than listening. Speaking, however, does not increase our store of knowledge. We can only speak what we already know, transferring truth from memory to speech.

If we are to learn more we must exchange speaking for listening. We must let God and others do the talking. With ears alert and mouths shut, we have an opportunity to learn more that we may live better.

For the sake of our spiritual growth we must sit at Jesus' feet and hear his words. This we need to do daily, not occasionally. As surely as we need daily food and water for our bodies we need daily sustenance for our souls.

Not everything we hear and overhear is helpful. We must listen to wise men and women, not to fools who "despise wisdom and discipline" (v. 7). Those who "fear the Lord" must be our mentors. Much talk is trash, and we don't need to be trash collectors. Lord, help us to exercise care in what we choose to hear and read. At eye-gate and ear-gate keep watch. Help us to keep our Bibles and hearts open. Speak to us that we may add to our learning for living.

## 2. Refusing Sinners

*My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them* (Proverbs 1:10).

The "if" is hypothetical; sinners will entice. Often the sin itself is enticing, for sin appeals to desires not wrong in themselves. Sin exists as a perversion of the good.

In the context, enticement is to robbery and to murder. The desire to possess "valuable things" is not wrong *per se*. To have them at the expense of rightful owners is wrong. To protect oneself is not wrong *per se*. To kill another who is a threat to one's career in crime is wrong. To want acceptance is not wrong *per se*. To gain acceptance by joining others in their sinning is wrong.

Sin's allure is dangerous, and some enhance its enticement as advocates for sin. Sinners entice others for two reasons: they want help in doing wrong and they feel less guilty when others share the wrongdoing. In every case they entice others for sinful reasons. Sin is self-centered even when group-committed.

Lord, teach us anew to say no to every temptation. Make us strong to take and hold unpopular stands against evil. Let us not buy favor with others at the cost of losing your company.

### 3. The Word Within

*My son...store up my commands within you (Proverbs 2:1).*

The Bible on a desk will not protect us from evil; only the Bible in our hearts will do that. The Bible on a desk may inform us, but the Bible in our hearts shapes our responses to temptation. The psalmist said, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."

Exterior to us, God's word can enlighten, command and direct, but only when his word is written upon our hearts does it become a power for obedience. We must, as Paul teaches, be transformed by the renewing of our minds. From God's mouth comes knowledge and understanding to guard "the course of the just" (vv. 6-8). We must live by "every word that comes from the mouth of God." We do this when our inner lives are cleansed and controlled by God's word.

Lord, we offer you our hearts as tablets. Inscribe on them your will for our lives. Program us for righteousness. This will furnish us the wisdom that saves "from the ways of wicked men...whose words are perverse" (v.12). Your word, stored within our hearts, is our defense against their words.

#### **4. Trusting the Lord**

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5).*

I keep a bookstand in my house that displays a Bible opened to this text. A son gave it to me on the fiftieth anniversary of my first sermon. From this text I preached; poor preaching but a choice text.

I possess today far more wisdom and understanding than I had on that far off Sunday morning. I understand God, myself and other people better. I understand God's word and way better. With this increased knowledge and understanding, however, I've never outgrown my need for this text.

Our understanding is a weak prop, an unreliable guide. To live effectively and fruitfully as Christians, we must trust in God with all our hearts.

Such trust is never misplaced, for God's love, wisdom and power are perfect. He sees what we cannot; he knows what we do not. He has what we need; he dares what we fear. He alone can resource our lives, guide our steps and assign our work. He alone can make us wise, keep us safe and get us home.

**"Trust in the Lord." He will never let us down and never let us go.**

## 5. Having and Giving

*Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, "Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow"—when you now have it with you (Proverbs 3:27-28).*

"Power to act" is created by what we "now have." The possibility of helping another creates the responsibility for helping. As Simon Peter said to a crippled beggar, "what I have I give..."

If we have what our neighbors need, we must give it right away. The language of the Holy Spirit is "now," not "tomorrow." Deferred help can be immediate harm to one whose need is pressing. What reason can there be for withheld good? Only the hope that someone else will be the source and bear the cost of the help needed. Even if that proves true, we would be robbed of the blessedness of giving and cursed with the misery of hoarding.

When help is requested, some see the request as a threat to their own resources and some view the request as an opportunity for service. Help us, Lord, to be in the latter group.

When "tomorrow" comes, what was good to give will be bad to have. If we keep what we should have given we will regret it. Having but withholding evidences lack of faith. Having and giving expresses love. Grant us, Lord, the "faith that works by love."

## **6. Supreme Possession**

***Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. (Proverbs 4:7).***

**"Wisdom is supreme." The writer/collector of Proverbs prices wisdom above gold, silver and rubies (3:14-15). "Nothing you desire can compare with her." When we think of what men have dared and done to possess these metals and stones, and how little they will exert or invest to get wisdom, we realize how blinding and deceiving is sin.**

**"Get wisdom." Already in this ancient book God has told us how: by listening to his words and storing them in our hearts; by listening to the counsel of godly men; by refusing every temptation to sin; by avoiding the fellowship of evildoers; by pursuing the path of righteousness with single-minded devotion.**

**Wise men sought the infant Jesus. They trekked deserts at great length to kneel before his crib. They were first guided by a star, but they found guidance in Scripture that was more exact in detail. They worshiped the baby and showered him with their treasures. They listened to God and took his direction to their home.**

**This instructs us in our quest for wisdom. We know its source and price. The Lord says, "Though it cost all you have, get understanding" (v. 7). Our hearts say, "Amen."**

## **7. A Son-lit Path**

*The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day (Proverbs 4:18).*

Who walks with the Lord walks in the light. Some of us have walked a few dark paths, unsure of direction and troubled by unfamiliar and distorted shapes. Recalling them makes us glad that we have been spared spiritually what we endured physically. It's comforting to pursue a lighted pathway.

Spiritually, the darkness was displaced by "dawn's early light" when we were converted. Those first faint gleams have steadily intensified as we have walked with the Lord. Our growing knowledge of the Bible has brought increasing light.

The path of the righteous will culminate in "the full light of day"--in high noon. This path leads to constant and perfect light. Death will not be "a leap into the dark," but a step into eternal light conducive to eternal growth in knowledge and service. The light of heaven will dispel all the shadows of earth.

Jesus is "the light" in this world and in the next. "The Lamb" is "the lamp" of both worlds. His atoning death makes sense of otherwise inexplicable events. In that light we will keep walking until journey's end. A Son-lit path is our way home.

## **8. Guard Your Heart**

*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).*

Once again the word of God reminds us that we live from the inside out. What is in the heart surfaces into words and deeds. We do what we are. If the spring is corrupt the stream will be polluted.

If we desire clean lives we must have pure hearts. We cannot purify them; the Lord must do that and he will. His blood provided and his word promises heart-cleansing. It is ours by faith in him.

We are responsible for guarding our hearts. Vigilance is the price of safety both politically and spiritually.

The context of this proverb tells us how to guard our hearts. Two things are involved, indicated by the words "talk" and "walk."

When the Lord talks we must listen carefully. He says to us, "pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words...keep them within your heart" (vv. 20, 21). His words stored in our hearts become our defense against every temptation.

When we walk we must tread carefully. With eyes "straight ahead" we must keep on solid ground and "level paths." Alluring side roads that lead to wickedness must be avoided. "Keep your foot from evil" is his mandate. Lord, keep us alert and firmly committed to your will.

## 9. The Ignorance of Sin

*She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths are crooked, but she knows it not* (Proverbs 5:6).

These words described "the adulteress." With sweet lips and smooth words she entices the unwary. Her chosen way leads "straight to the grave." The death of body and soul is the outcome of her crooked paths.

According to the writer of Proverbs, she is unaware of a better way and ignorant of the fatal consequences of her way. "She gives no thought...she knows it not."

There is an appalling ignorance of God, truth, ethics and destiny among sinners. We were once among the most unseeing, unfeeling and uncaring. To the "fool" life is self-centered, and the immediate and constant gratification of sensual lust is all that matters. The way of "the adulteress" is the way of all sinners--a shortsighted and self-destructive life-style.

The ignorance of sin was sharply attested in Jesus' death. From the cross he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." The men who plotted his execution would have scorned "the adulteress," but they were ignorantly rejecting "the way of life" for a path leading "down to death."

"Keep to a path far from her" was crucial advice then and now. Those whose law is self-indulgence should be shunned like the plague.

## 10. The Watcher

*For a man's ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all his paths* (Proverbs 5:21).

**“A man's ways” are his own ways, not the Lord's ways. Because of the blinding character of sin, the Lord's ways are hidden from him, but his ways are not hidden from the Lord. He knows the deepest and truest facts about us. All a man is and does are open to his scrutiny. No man sins with impunity for no man sins in secrecy. Everything hidden will be revealed for nothing is hidden from the Lord.**

**A man's ways may be hidden from others and even from himself, for it is the nature of sin to deceive. That's why sin is self-ensnaring, self-destructive. A wicked man, exulting in supposed freedom, is held fast by "the cords of his sin," and "led astray by his own great folly."**

**Another piece of wisdom literature declares, "God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Eccl. 12:14). There is one way only to escape judgment for "secret" sins--God's gracious forgiveness when a sinner repents. This removes a man from his own ways to "the way of life," from "crooked paths" to "straight paths."**

**Fools mock at sin and joke about judgment, but nothing is more certain than God's coming judgment upon sin. Let us be found among the wise, not the fools.**

## 11. The Ant's Ways

*Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!*

(Proverbs 6:6).

Here's a startling thing: A man's ways are condemned; an ant's ways are commended. Man is the only creature endowed with freedom to choose his ways. That freedom has been abused, and because of sin man is the only creature whose ways are perverse. Only man lives in rebellion against his creator. In the very name of freedom man enslaves and destroys himself. God cannot commend a man's ways to the ant, but he does commend the ant's ways to a man.

The man in view here is a "sluggard." A sluggard is not a man who cannot work; he is a man who will not work. Our government encourages the sluggard, robbing the workers to pay the idlers. God's word, however, opposes the sloth and theft that comprises so much of the welfare system. Philosophers and theologians may sneer at "the Protestant work ethic," but Scripture supports it.

Paul said bluntly, "we gave you this rule: `If a man will not work, he shall not eat.'" He condemned those who used the name of "brother" as a cloak for idleness and sponging. He urged thieves to "steal no longer," and to work, "doing something useful" in order to have and to share.

A tiny ant can teach a huge man.

## 12. God Hates Dissension

*...The Lord hates...a man who stirs up dissension among brothers (Proverbs 6:16, 19).*

How did this ancient maker and keeper of proverbs know what was on God's hate list? Was he that perfectly attuned to God's mind? Probably not. God said through Isaiah, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:9).

We can only know God's thoughts if God makes them known by his words. The seven sins catalogued here are elsewhere condemned in Scripture.

The inclusion of "dissension among brothers" with lying words and murder is intriguing. God calls "a man who stirs up dissension" both "a scoundrel and villain" (vv. 12, 14). That is a strong condemnation. By implication, it shows how highly God values unity and peace among his people.

A person in the church who deliberately creates discord and chaos is doing the devil's business in God's name. That is deserving of God's wrath.

We don't want to be on God's hate list. We would be safer on a Mafia hit list! We want peace with God and his people. Not at the cost of truth, but at any price compatible with holiness, we want peace.

### 13. Our Father's Commands

*When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you (Proverbs 6:22).*

The Father's commands guide us. When we walk we would either stray or stumble except for his words. They are light for the daily path and our obedience to them is our security. We can say with a psalmist, "Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors" (Ps. 119:24). The Father's teaching is "a light;" his discipline is "the way to life."

The Father's commands guard us. They "watch over" us when we sleep. His word is on sentry duty when we are unaware of what is happening. They should be in our last thoughts before we sleep, in our first thoughts when we awake. During the hours between they keep a sleepless vigil. His words are our protection against all enemies of truth. With a psalmist we can affirm, "I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me. I will not fear..." (Ps. 3:5, 6).

The Father's commands govern us. They "speak" to us as commandments, not as advice. When we obey we have freedom, for we were created to live under his rule. A psalmist said, "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free" (Ps. 119:32). We are free only when we are bound to God.

## 14. On Guard

*Keep my commands and you will live; guard my teachings as the apple of your eye (Proverbs 7:2).*

God's commands are to be "kept," which means obeyed, not hoarded. They are to be guarded, which means lived out, not fenced in. We keep and guard his words only as we allow ourselves to be kept and guarded by them. They are to be operative, informing and inspiring our life-style.

When written on the heart, his commands form the control center of our actions, reactions and interactions. They determine our responses to the stimuli of life around us. Bound on our fingers they come to expression in what we say and do, in how we relate to God, to people and to things.

Earlier we were told to guard our hearts (4:23). Now we are told to guard the Father's teachings. The two are vitally related, opposite sides of a single coin. We guard our hearts by keeping his words in them. We guard his teachings by yielding our hearts to them.

The "apple" of the eye is the pupil, something precious to be protected. It translates Hebrew expressions meaning "little man of the eye" and "daughter of the eye," because it reflects the image of the person one looks at. If we want the image of Jesus reflected in our lives, we must look to him and let his words shape us.

## 15. The Quest

*So I came out to meet you; I looked for you and have found you!* (Proverbs 7:15).

In context, these are the words of "the adulteress" to a "simple" young man. She is an unhappy wife seeking a sexual adventure. She meets him "dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent." Her husband is away, and she brazenly kisses her prey and invites him to her house and bed. That scenario has been acted out, with subtle variations, thousands of times.

The prophets repeatedly labeled as "adultery" the idolatry and consequent immorality of Israel. With no violence to Scripture a larger context may be given these words. They are the words of all who would entice us from our loyalty to the Lord and to his words. One thing is sure; a person never has to go looking for temptation and sin. They come looking for victims, offering what they cannot deliver--true love and pure pleasure. These are found only when the heart is fixed on the Lord.

The Lord also comes out to meet us; he also looks for us and finds us. This is the picture Jesus sketched of God--a shepherd seeking lost sheep at great cost to himself. He offers and delivers love that is wholly redemptive, not destructive. He does not take life; he gives it. His house is not "a highway to the grave" (v. 27); it is the way to life eternal.

## 16. Calling and Hearing

*Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? ....Listen, for I have worthy things to say.... Choose my instruction instead of silver...(Proverbs 8:1, 6, 10).*

**A call! A loud cry tells us that God has an urgent message and we need to pay attention. A person raises his voice when danger is imminent and competing noises make attention hard to obtain. We must not let the clamor of the world or the carelessness of our hearts keep us from hearing what the Lord says. Wisdom calls "where the paths meet" and "beside the gates"--that is, where human lives intersect. Let us not miss her voice because of the noisy traffic.**

**A challenge! "Listen, for I have worthy things to say." We are responsible for what we give our attention to. We overhear some things we don't intend to or care to, but what we deliberately listen to will make or break us. It will determine our character, behavior and destiny. When God says, "Listen," we need to give full attention to his words. What he says has life or death urgency.**

**A choice! "Choose my instruction instead of silver..." Whether we listen or not is our choice. That choice reflects our priorities. There is always an "instead of;" we can't have everything. When Mary sat at Jesus' feet to hear his words, he said, "Mary has chosen what is better." Lord, help us to choose wisely, to listen closely and to live eternally.**

## 17. Seek, Find, Live

*I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me.... For whoever finds me finds life... But whoever fails to find me harms himself... (Proverbs 8:17, 35, 36).*

"Seek and you will find" is a law of God's kingdom. He has promised to reward the prayer for wisdom (Jas.1:5-6). This does not mean that all his people will be geniuses or live mistake-free lives. It means that he will grant them wisdom that enables them to live lives of holiness and usefulness.

Those who seek wisdom will find it, and those who find wisdom find life. Wisdom walks "the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice." Wise men listen to God's words. They receive "favor" from him; as John puts it, "one blessing after another" (1:16).

Throughout the wisdom literature we find the doctrine of the two ways, one leading to life, the other to death. Life is fellowship with God forever. Death is separation from him. We choose our way and its consequences. Those who reject wisdom are committing spiritual suicide.

How gracious God is to make the way of life available to all who will love and seek wisdom. How gracious he is to post warning signs along the way of death. None will ever perish because God was unloving or unfair.

Let us choose the way of life. Let us quest daily for wisdom. Let us praise God for all his favors.

## 18. Eternal Wisdom

*I was appointed from eternity.... I was there when he set the heavens in place.... Then I was the craftsman at his side....rejoicing always in his presence... (Proverbs 8:23, 27, 30).*

From eternity Wisdom "was given birth." The Lord has always been wise. He did not become wise through experience or by experiment. He did not gain wisdom by "trial and error." Wisdom did not arise from his works; his works arose from wisdom. He possessed wisdom "at the beginning of his work."

Wisdom was there when "the heavens" and "the earth" were created. Everything about them reflected the creator's wisdom. There was order and beauty and purpose in everything, from the tiniest grain of sand to the immensity of space.

Wisdom was delighted by God's works--rejoicing in his presence, rejoicing in the whole world and rejoicing in mankind. We delight in nature in spite of the ugliness and disorder caused by sin. We should treat with respect "the whole world" and all "mankind" because God is their wise and good creator. We should especially treasure his fellowship as part of the "new creation" which reflects his wisdom and power as expressions of his love.

In wisdom God created and redeemed. Let us adore and seek his wisdom.

## 19. Life or Death

*Let all who are simple come in here!* (Proverbs 9:4, 16).

Two invitations are issued "to those who lack judgment." They may dine in the house of wisdom or dine in the house of folly. The food offered by wisdom strengthens the diner to "walk in the way of understanding." The menu offered by folly is "stolen" and "secret," for evil can exist only as perverted and forbidden good. Those who dine with folly join the dead.

In this poetic way the Lord sets before us life or death and saddles us with the responsibility of choice. We can choose to be morally wise or morally foolish. We cannot evade the responsibility of choosing; we cannot escape the consequences of our choices.

We may find wisdom's correction and instruction painful, but the outcome is life. We may find the pursuit of folly "sweet" and "delicious" for a time, but the outcome is death.

Where we take our meals is readily disclosed when we are rebuked. "A wicked man" will hate, abuse and insult those who reprove his misdeeds. "A wise man" will accept reproof and become wiser thereby.

We enter wisdom's house and dine on her provisions when we go to God's house and share the Lord's Supper. By this we are reprovved, corrected, instructed and strengthened. To fear him is wisdom's beginning. To fellowship with him is wisdom's reward.

## 20. Diligence and Wealth

*Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth (Proverbs 10:4).*

The previous proverb says, "The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry." God feeds the righteous by giving him strength to earn his bread. Righteous persons will not be lazy persons; they will be willing to "gather crops in summer" (v. 5).

Wealth is earned, stolen or inherited. If the inheritor uses riches for selfish and hedonistic living, then inherited wealth is also stolen. The test of wealth is how one gets it and how one spends it.

Of course, diligent hands do not always bring wealth. Some labor at jobs that never reward them materially. For example, pastors are not usually lazy but they are seldom wealthy. At most, they make a living; they don't wallow in luxury.

The proverb is true spiritually, also, and diligent hands produce the wealth that matters most. The poorest of us can enjoy rich fellowship with God through patient and persistent study of his word. We have a wealth of friends in the church who abundantly satisfy our needs to belong and to serve. Our service gives us a share in the harvest of people reached for the Lord through faithful witness to his love and power to save.

These are treasures indeed--a wealth that endures.

## 21. Blessed Memories

*The memory of the righteous will be a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot (Proverbs 10:7).*

I have lived long enough to see this proverb demonstrated. I can recall persons who walked with God, who inspired my ministry in its earliest days, and their memory is a blessing. It helps to impel me onward and upward in my Christian life. Each time I hear their names, or recall them silently, I thank God for them.

"Not so the wicked" as the psalmist said. I don't recall them deliberately, and when their names come to mind unbidden I dismiss them promptly. I change the subject gladly.

I think this is generally true, despite the unfortunate "glamorizing" of criminals that often takes place in media. The television and movie industries rewrite history, not in quest of accuracy and truth, but to manufacture box-office heroes.

Public assessments of good and evil, faulty as they often are, do not disprove this proverb. It has well been said that boys are named Paul but dogs are named Nero. Poor dogs! They deserve better.

The only character Jesus ever named in a parable was a beggar who died and went to heaven. He left unnamed the rich man who went to hell. Sin ultimately destroys identity.

## **22. Foolish Speech, Wise Silence**

*When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise (Proverbs 10:19).*

The gossip, the chatterbox and the compulsive talker always betray the truth. They damage themselves and others by their incessant yackety-yak. Those who are embarrassed by silence will soon make embarrassing speeches. As someone long ago said, "It's easy to over-talk."

"Oral personalities" are pitiful. They are insecure and unhappy with themselves, and they are intrusive and boring to others. Driven by some unmet need, they rattle on forever. Seeking to impress, they betray confidences. Seeking to amuse, they babble inanities. The thoughts of those who are always "chewing the fat" are nearly always lean.

We know that silence can be hurtful too--the sullen pout, the frigid refusal to converse that leaves another puzzled or punished. But far more damage has been done by speech than by silence.

There are times when silence says more, and says it more eloquently, than do words. Jesus was silent before Pilate. His silence expressed disdain for Pilate's boasted authority and expressed confidence in the ultimate judgment of God.

Lord, help us to hold our tongues when words would only mean sin and strife. Give us strength to be silent.

## 23. Reading Futures

*What the wicked dreads will overtake him; what the righteous desire will be granted (Proverbs 10:24).*

What does the wicked fear? He fears the loss of what he gained by wickedness, the fortune he amassed by making crooked deals and preying upon helpless people. Death will strip him of everything.

The wicked fears the exposure of secret sins and punishment for his misdeeds. In a word, he fears justice. "God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing"--in this world or the next. Sooner or later the wicked will be overtaken by his worst fears.

What does the righteous desire? He desires mercy. The righteous are not persons who never sinned. They are persons who repented and were forgiven. They are justified, not by their good works, but by a God who delights in showing mercy to all who turn from their sins.

The righteous desire above all things the favor and fellowship of the Lord. This he grants them in this world and throughout eternity. "When the storm [of judgment] has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever" (v. 25). This is what Jesus taught in the closing words of the Sermon on the Mount.

Verse 28 tells us, "The prospect of the righteous is joy." Let's be prospectors!

## 24. Refuge or Ruin

*The way of the Lord is a refuge for the righteous, but it is the ruin of those who do evil (Proverbs 10:29).*

The writer of Proverbs could talk about the way of the Lord. Since Jesus came, we can talk about the Lord who is “the way.”

He is the refuge or ruin of every person. Those who follow him find refuge. Storms come, for he is not an easy way. He is the way of the cross, the way of sacrifice and suffering, but in him there is refuge. The storms cannot defeat or destroy his followers. "The righteous will never be uprooted" (v. 30). "The man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:17). The will of God is this above all, that we take refuge in Jesus.

Those who reject Jesus come to ruin. They may seem to prosper, but so do cattle being fattened for slaughter. Their doom is sure. He is the savior of all who believe, and the judge of all who refuse to believe. Their idols will be shattered; their misplaced trust will be punished.

This is God's world, therefore evil cannot be permanent. He will judge the world in righteousness and truth. The triumphs of evildoers are short-lived. Their little systems "have their day and cease to be." Why should we envy any person's present whose past and future we would not desire? Jesus is our refuge, and that is enough.

## **25. When Wealth is Worthless**

***Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death (Proverbs 11:4).***

The "wrath" mentioned here is divine, not human. God may employ human agents to execute his wrath (as he did Babylon), but it is his wrath men should fear. When he appoints a day of judgment upon evil, wealth cannot avert or escape it. Human judges may be bribed, human justice may miscarry, but when God pours out his wrath the highest, the proudest and the wealthiest are destroyed as surely as any others.

The "righteousness" mentioned here is true, not false. It is not self-righteousness. It is righteousness by faith, not by works. It is not the veneer of the Pharisee, who could mask his wrongs behind outward shows of prayer, alms giving, rules keeping and ritual observances. It is the righteousness of one who has repented of his or her sins, who has received divine forgiveness, and who lives thereafter in obedience to God as an expression of gratitude.

The "death" mentioned here is spiritual, not physical. The righteous will die physically as surely as the unrighteous. Death knocks at every door, ornate or plain. But spiritual death, eternal death, which is the ultimate consequence of sin and wrath, will not be the folly and the fate of those who trust in Jesus. They are destined to see and to share his glory forever. "Pride," "duplicity" and "wickedness" (vv. 2, 3, 5) bring death. Trusting Jesus brings life.

## 26. The Destroyer

*With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape (Proverbs 11:9).*

Words can destroy as surely as bullets--destroy marriages, families, careers and churches. Ultimately, cruel speech is self-destructive, taking the liar, gossip, and curser down with their victims.

As children we parroted the common response to name-calling: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." That wasn't true. We chanted the nonsense because words had already hurt us.

A person can destroy another by derision (v. 12), by gossip (v. 13), by lying and by truth told in loveless cruelty. The mouth may be a vicious weapon that brings poison and death to human relationships.

The righteous escape destruction through "knowledge."

Knowing oneself can be crucial. If we are slandered, we can react out of knowledge that we are God's forgiven and adopted children. Even when taunted by vengeful persons reciting past sins, we can find refuge, healing and strength in the awareness of his continued mercy.

The "godless" must account to God for their words and motives: we must account to him for our reaction to hurting words. If we abide in his words we will not be destroyed by the words of others.

## 27. Certain Destinies

***Be sure of this: The wicked will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will go free (Proverbs 11:21).***

The wicked are those who refuse to live by God's words. They are not merely ignorant, they are rebellious. They have chosen to be self-governed, not God-governed.

Their punishment is certain, for God is holy and just. No evil man can escape judgment: "he who pursues evil goes to his death" (v. 19). This death is more than physical; this is the spiritual and eternal death that is sin's final punishment. Paul says of the wicked, "They will be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord..." (2 Thes. 1:9). Separation from God forever is death and hell.

The "righteous" are those who ceased their rebellion and received God's pardon. Trusting in him, and grateful for pardon, they joyfully and earnestly strive to live by his words. They have chosen to be governed by God.

They "will go free." They are freed to be God's servants. They are free from condemnation. They are free from fear of coming judgment, for his sentence has already been given in their pardon.

Lord, we have chosen to be your children, not your enemies. Our destiny is life (v. 19). Praise your name!

## **28. Godlike Generosity**

***A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed (Proverbs 11:25).***

**In a number of places the Bible affirms the boomerang effect of life. What we put into it, we get back from it. What we do to others is done to us. What we give we receive. This is true of doing good and true of doing evil. Our chickens come home to roost.**

**God enriches generous people. Those who give freely gain even more. Those who withhold unduly come to poverty (v. 24). He who loses his life finds it; he who saves his life loses it. Givers are receivers and hoarders are losers.**

**Payment is not always in kind. The one who divests himself of material goods to help the poor may not gain a larger income; he will gain a bigger soul. He will be rich in spirit, rich in friends and rich in godlike character and conduct.**

**Some have abused this proverb and kindred scriptures. They advocate a "give to get" gospel with themselves as the donees. Giving to get is an attempt to manipulate God. It is a con game with religious flavoring. It places a halo on selfishness. God blesses the benefactor who gives to meet needs, not the schemer who gives to enrich himself.**

**Stinginess and holiness are incompatible. Where mammon is god judgment is inescapable. Where the Lord is God, generosity is inevitable. Generosity is godlike.**

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## 29. Enduring the Storms

*A man cannot be established through wickedness, but the righteous cannot be uprooted (Proverbs 12:3).*

We have all seen the extensive damage done by a hurricane. Hundreds of trees are uprooted and lay jumbled on the ground like jackstraws. Reading this proverb we recall such scenes of destruction.

The wicked are rootless. When storms assail they cannot stand. During the Great Depression many men of wealth shot themselves or leaped from high places to their deaths. When financial disaster struck they had no roots deeper than money and pride. Losing roots, they were toppled. The poor who trusted God endured.

The righteous are rooted in the soil of God's love, a love that accepts, forgives, sustains and endures. Their trust is in the unfailing friend and savior of his people. They will not be uprooted, for God cannot be shaken. He is their rock, and built upon that rock they are invincible.

They are invincible, not unassailable. The storms do come, and fierce and frightening they often are. Their toll of shattered human lives is awful. They sweep away, in their fury, both idols and their devotees. But God remains and those who take refuge in him continue to stand.

### **30. Be Well Advised**

*The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice (Proverbs 12:15).*

Men are usually adept at justifying their foolish actions. They constitute their own court of appeals. Since they refuse to acknowledge any divine or human authority over their lives, they shrug off the damage they inflict, saying, "It seemed right to me." Today's paper carried a story of disastrous action taken by some local politicians. They consulted only themselves, and one explained his vote by saying, "I just felt good about the matter."

What seems right can be wrong. What feels good can be bad. What pleases us can destroy others. Some higher law than glandular secretions is needed. Surer guidance than individual conscience is needed. What we need in order to live rightly is God's wisdom as expressed in the clear teaching of Scripture.

"A wise man listens to advice." Of course if he is wise he doesn't take advice from fools. He wouldn't take financial advice from someone who had gone bankrupt. He wouldn't take marital advice from a seven-times divorced celebrity. He wouldn't take moral advice from a drug-addicted criminal. The wise take advice from winners, not losers; from successes, not failures.

We don't wish to be guided by the unsaved or backslidden in our spiritual journey. The Bible and the saints shall be our mentors. Thank the Lord for them.

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### 31. Wounding and Healing

*Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing (Proverbs 12:18).*

Man was made to speak. He was created and endowed as God's conversation partner. Because of sin, we speak too much but say too little. Too much of our speech is careless. We speak before we think. We speak before we check our sources of information. We speak before we weigh the consequences of our statements.

Words can wound, especially words spoken in ignorance or in anger; especially words of gossip, of deceit or of vengeance. Words of confession, even when necessary, can stab the hearts of others. Few, if any, have not spoken "reckless words" that "pierce like a sword." Well does James exhort us to be swift to hear and slow to speak.

Words can also heal. Gentle words, patient words, reproving words, understanding words, forgiving words, bracing words--these can all bring healing to angry minds, to broken hearts and to damaged relationships.

Words spoken in love, in acceptance and in sympathy can close wounds and allow the processes of healing to bring new strength, peace and life. Among the most healing are "I was wrong," "I am sorry," "Please forgive me." Most healing of all, "I love you," "I need you," "I am here for you." Lord, grant us healing tongues. Your words heal us; help ours to heal others.

## 32. Cheering Words

*An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up (Proverbs 12:25).*

These words bring to mind a comic strip that appeared years ago. Snoopy is trotting along through a downpour, looking and feeling despondent. Full of self-pity the woebegone beagle is sure that no one loves him. Charlie Brown spots him and yells, "Get out of the rain, you stupid dog!" Suddenly Snoopy is still trotting through the rain, but his head is up and his eyes are alive, and he exclaims, "Somebody cares!"

Reading the Gospels, we frequently hear Jesus saying, "Cheer up," "Take heart," and speaking other words that supply a reason for cheer. He specialized in encouragement. His words brought healing to the sick, comfort to the sorrowing and courage to the oppressed. His words inspired faith, hope, and love.

Let us thank God today for those who have cheered us with kind words in our "down" times. We know all about a heart weighed down with care and cheered up by kind words. We've been there, and each time God sent someone along to speak words that renewed our courage and brightened our outlook. Sometimes he made us the bearer of heartening words to others--for that we thank him, too.

God's words bring us unfailing comfort. Whatever the situation, he directs an appropriate promise to us. For his kind words our cheered hearts say, "Thanks!"

### **33. Guarded Lips**

*He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin (Proverbs 13:3).*

The lips speak what the soul feels, thinks and desires. The inner condition is expressed in speech. To guard our mouths we must guard our souls. Sentries must be posted at both places.

How can I guard them? By heeding God's words we guard our words. His instructions and his commands, when taken to heart, exert a purifying and restraining influence upon our souls and lips.

God's word teaches us to speak softly, kindly, truthfully, lovingly, and sparingly. His words warn us against speaking rashly, harshly, deceitfully and constantly. They describe the tongue at its best and worst. All of this prompts us to post the guards.

When I edited a magazine, I learned the value of guarding my lips by heeding God's words. I got a lot of angry letters, filled with name-calling and false accusations. I kept before me on my desk God's words: "A gentle answer turns away wrath" (15:1). Often I received letters of apology after replying gently to harsh criticism.

Much in life is determined by the quality of one's speech. Lord, guard our lips by your wisdom.

### **34. Shining Brightly**

*The light of the righteous shines brightly, but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out (Proverbs 13:9).*

The Lord kindles and fuels "the light of the righteous." When he forgives our sins and renews our hearts, our light begins to shine. As we are guided by his word and Spirit, it shines with increasing brightness. Those who know our pasts behold our good works and glorify him as their source and power.

Walking with God we never stumble in darkness. We have the light of life. We quit the darkness when we turn from sin to him. We come into the light, that he may be known as the energizing force of our changed lives (John 3:21). We "shine like stars" as we hold to "the word of life" (Phil. 2:15, 16).

Living in the light, living as light, is a fulfilling and joyous pursuit. Stars shine as their mass is converted to energy. We shine as we spend ourselves for God and for the gospel. We give ourselves to the greatest of masters and for the greatest of messages.

The wicked prefer darkness, not wanting their sins exposed, not wanting their idols destroyed. They refuse the light, and what they choose becomes their fate. Their descent is into everlasting darkness.

Lord, we thank you for bringing us from darkness into light, from death into life. We will walk in the light today.

### **35. Teaching, Turning, Traps**

*The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death (Proverbs 13:14).*

The Lord speaks to us of teaching. We all live by someone's teaching. Choose to be mentored by the wise who receive, transmit, explain and apply God's word. Choose to sit at the feet of those chosen by God as teachers. Praise God for all who have taught us to live. Their teaching, by exposition and example, has illumined our paths and has strengthened our hearts.

The Lord speaks to us of turning. The effect of the teaching is a turning from death to life. Wisdom dispensed by his anointed teachers issues in our repentance. It puts us on the road to God, to freedom, to service and to heaven. Having turned to him, we will not turn from him. He is the fountain of life. From him we will drink daily and live eternally.

The Lord speaks to us of traps--"the snares of death." Death digs its pits and baits its traps, seeking to capture our souls as a trapper catches prey. Through God's teaching, learned and practiced, we avoid the traps and preserve our lives. He keeps us from sin and death as he gives and guides life. Walking with him we are both satisfied and secured.

### 36. Peer Group Pressure

*He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm (Proverbs 13:20).*

Peer group pressure is a mighty force. Few wish to be different; all wish to be accepted. This is just as true in the moral universe as in the physical. Choosing companions carefully is an important challenge. We become like those with whom we walk.

"He was a good boy, but he fell in with a bad crowd." How often we hear that from grieving parents when a son is arrested for crime. The truth is, we choose our "crowd," and if we lack the moral courage to reject bad company our misdeeds are the consequences of our own foolish choices.

This proverb recalls advice my father gave me, though he put it less politely: "Hang around with people smarter than you. It will make you feel awful dumb at times, but you'll learn something." To be wise we must learn from the wise. To be fools we have only to company with fools.

Christians want to be like Jesus. For that to happen we must walk with him. We can trace his paths through the Gospels. We can watch what he does, hear what he says and learn why he spoke and acted as he did. In doing this we will grow in wisdom, purity and love. What will today's lessons be?

### **37. Investments and Dividends**

*Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty, but from the strength of an ox comes an abundant harvest (Proverbs 14:4).*

In olden times oxen were used to pull the plows and carts of those who tilled the fields. It cost to keep oxen; their feed boxes had to be filled. But a good ox was worth far more than his own keep. His strength made possible the "abundant harvest" that provided for needs of the farmer and his family. And empty manger was prelude to an empty larder. To starve an ox was more than cruel--it was suicidal.

What was true of oxen is true of persons. If they are to be productive, they must be well kept. A company that pays good wages will attract the honest, energetic workers. Those who pay poorly will not.

Mosaic law forbade the muzzling of oxen that tread out the corn. Paul applied the statute to preachers. The church that wants an abundant harvest should support the parsonage family well, freeing the pastor's mind and time for needed study and prayer. Unwillingness to make this investment has kept many churches small, hungry and malcontent.

FDR used to say, "You have to spend money to make money." Large dividends call for large investments. That's even true of personal devotions. We must devote time and effort in study and prayer or our souls will starve.

### **38. Making Amends**

*Fools mock at making amends for sin, but goodwill is found among the upright (Proverbs 14:9).*

The Lord made atonement for sin and created the possibility of full and free forgiveness for penitent sinners. Our forgiveness, however, does not excuse us from making amends for our sins as far as possible.

If we have wronged others--and who hasn't?--our influence over them and their confidence in us will depend in great part upon apologies and restitution. If we owe them money, we will repay it. If we owe them apologies, we will make them. We will do all within our power to redress the wrongs we inflicted, and thus demonstrate the sincerity of our faith, hope and love.

He is a fool who acts as though his sins do not matter. Those sins have inflicted hurt upon their victims. To remove, or at least reduce, that hurt by confession and apology and restitution becomes a Christian duty. In making amends for sin "the upright" purchase good will, and good will enhances the opportunity to reach others for the Lord.

Making amends may be the hardest thing anyone can do. It also produces some of the greatest joy we've ever known.

### **39. The Right Way**

***There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death (Proverbs 14:12).***

**If a man is going to travel a chosen road he had better know where it will end. We can't get to the right place on the wrong road, and we don't need to waste time, energy and other resources on detours, sidetracks or dead ends.**

**Attach to this proverb the words of Jesus, "I am the way" (John 14:6). He is the way to life, freedom and heaven. He is the way to God, and God is our goal. We only reach God through Jesus, who also said, "No one comes to the Father except through me."**

**This truth simplifies many of our decisions and choices. Whatever contradicts Jesus' character or example or teachings or commands is a forbidden way. Pursuing it would mean spiritual and eternal death.**

**To follow the Son is to know the Father and to know them is life eternal (John 17:3). Other ways "seem right" because they are popular with the world, congenial to the flesh, and camouflaged by the devil. The wide gate, the broad way, and the many travelers can powerfully attract the unwary, but the end is death. Those who choose the small gate, the narrow way and the devoted few are bound for life everlasting.**

#### **40. Let Grace Govern Life**

***A quick-tempered man does foolish things... (Proverbs 14:17).***

**A quick-tempered man is ruled by emotion, not by reason. As a consequence, his "foolish things" often include words and deeds that damage or destroy life's most important relationships. Many quick-tempered men and women are in prison cells, full of dead-end regret.**

**This proverb always calls to mind my father. Such a temper! As a boy I often worked with him on home repair projects. His temper would sky rocket, he would "curse a blue streak," and he would fill the air with flying tools. After a few minutes he would subside, I would gather up the tools, and the work would proceed.**

**Before the Lord changed him my wife's father was quick-tempered. His fuse was longer than dad's, but the explosions could be as destructive. Once, when his tractor wouldn't crank on a cold morning, he beat its hood in with a wrench. I knew him as a sweet, patient and godly man who demonstrated the radical changes that grace can make.**

**We should not be hotly emotional or coldly rational. God's love should so master our feeling and thinking that we may be slow to anger but swift to kindness and forgiveness.**

## 41. The Poor

*He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God (Proverbs 14:31).*

The Lord created the poor but he didn't create poverty. Many factors contribute to poverty; among them are indolence, ignorance, illness and oppression by the rich. Since these conditions are always present in society we will always have the poor as Jesus told us.

We honor God by kindness to them. "Remembering" the poor was the duty of the early church and a hallmark of apostolic ministry. "Love offerings" for their relief were encouraged. The church that ignores them betrays the Lord. He is their maker, redeemer and defender.

We can oppress them by simply ignoring their plight. We can oppress them by doing nothing to change the conditions that create poverty. We can oppress them by favoring the rich in our courts. We can oppress them by withholding from them the gospel that could liberate them. There are many ways to oppress the poor and all of them insult God.

There are ways to help that do not encourage poverty. There are ways to help that do not condemn the victims of poverty. The church should be wise, kind and resourceful in its ministry to the poor. Help the poor today and thus honor God.

## 42. Disgraced Country

*Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people* (Proverbs 14:34).

Measured by this yardstick, few nations have been righteous throughout history. Our nation is terribly unrighteous.

Few nations have been exalted by righteousness. So far from demonstrating the front end of this proverb, they have confirmed the adage, "Power corrupts." In the most civilized of nations, corruption, oppression and exploitation have prevailed. Reform movements have improved some wicked conditions, but too often reforms are broken and ideals are shattered on the cold, hard rocks of lust, greed and force. Within my lifetime the nation most advanced in culture plunged the world into two global wars.

Sin disgraces America. We give legislative approval to what is clearly forbidden in God's word. Our system of jurisprudence is more a contest of lawyers than a search for truth and justice. Among our political leaders graft, theft and influence peddling have been rife. The press, reputed "watchdog" of society, slants, distorts and manages news to promote its own agenda. A malaise of distrust prevails among the citizenry.

Our hope of righteous government is the return of Jesus.

### **43. Gentle Answers**

*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (Proverbs 15:1).*

We can make frequent and valuable use of this proverb. It serves well those who conduct church board meetings. It helps us, when tones get accusatory and belligerent, not to reply in kind. Many tense situations can be defused and creative peace restored by practicing this proverb.

It can keep editors of church publications cool under fire. The first readers an editor hears from are usually angry about something they read in, or read into, an article or editorial. Were there any bad names I wasn't called? When replying to irate readers, this proverb should be consulted.

Gentle responses can avert much wrath. Gentle answers come from gentle spirits. The gentling of our spirits is a triumph of God's grace. When sin rules the heart a person doesn't care how others feel or act. The Holy Spirit, whose fruit is love, takes us captive to the Golden Rule and transforms our attitudes.

You can avert much wrath but you can't avoid all wrath. The purest and truest man who ever lived was opposed by angry critics throughout his public ministry. They finally hounded him to a cross. What was his reaction? With dying breath he prayed for their forgiveness. Think of that the next time wrath charges you like a stampeding herd of elephants.

#### 44. Keeping Watch

*The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good (Proverbs 15:3).*

Nothing escapes the Lord's knowledge. Men and women have no secrets from him. We can hide from one another, and even from ourselves, but he knows us completely. We don't need to inform him about anyone or anything--he already knows the best and worst of all. When you think about it, the Lord would be a gossip's biggest disappointment.

This proverb is at once troubling and comforting, depending upon our faith or lack of faith. If the Lord knows all that transpires, why doesn't he curb the wicked and prevent their evildoing? Either he doesn't care or can't help--so runs a very ancient and persistent argument. In either case, that he keeps watch means nothing. Men who daily add to the world's wickedness want to indict God for allowing it.

Shortsighted and feebleminded creatures imagine themselves capable of advising God. All the while they stubbornly refuse obedience to his word and then blame him for the consequences of their misdeeds.

He is keeping watch and he will bring judgment. Ultimately, there will be no unrewarded good, no unpunished evil, but we can't mark his calendar or dictate his schedule. We need patient faith.

## 45. Treasures

*The house of the righteous contains great treasure, but the income of the wicked brings them trouble (Proverbs 15:6).*

A righteous person is someone who has repented of sin and received God's forgiveness. This changes directions and desires. The righteous are not super saints with unstained performance records. They are sinners who were reborn through the power of the atoning death and risen life of Jesus Christ.

In their houses are great treasures! They are not the kind of treasures that would attract a discriminating thief. They are not the kind of treasures that could fetch a huge price at Sotheby's or lend great prestige to some museum. These treasures are better than art and antiques, better than silver and gold.

The greatest treasure of the righteous is the presence of the Lord. Next to that is the Bible which reveals the meaning of his presence. They would forfeit any other material objects for the privilege of having a Bible. They enjoy priceless treasures of faith, hope and love by which family life is sustained and hallowed. In what matters most they are extremely wealthy people.

True wealth cannot be collapsed by winds, swept away by floods or reduced to ashes by fires. Death can remove us from temporal treasures but cannot remove eternal treasures from us. If you are curious about the bottom line you can find it in the closing chapter of the Bible.

## 46. The Detested

*The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him (Proverbs 15:8).*

The Lord is not impressed with rituals in the absence of reality. A facade of religion may deceive men, even please men, but it disgusts the Lord. The sacrifice of the wicked is really an attempt to bribe God, to exploit God or to manipulate God. It seeks his favor without honoring his demands for repentance and for righteousness.

No man can bring enough sacrifices, practice enough rituals, say enough prayers, or give enough money to avert God's wrath against sin. Many churches have curried the favor of the rich and famous, downplaying their sins in exchange for their dollars. This betrayal of God's holiness and truth is worse than the sins of their powerful and pampered members. God will bring them all into judgment.

God enjoys communion with the upright. When he speaks they listen. When they pray he listens. He hears the sinner who seeks pardon, not the churchman who honors him on Sunday and denies him on weekdays.

Samuel teaches us that God requires obedience, not sacrifice. David teaches us that God desires truth in our inner lives, not religious conformity that cloaks sin. A greater one teaches us that unclean hearts nullify ritual cleansings. The Lord is real and he demands reality.

## 47. Atmosphere Beats Possessions

*Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great wealth with turmoil. Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred (Proverbs 15:16-17).*

Atmosphere is more important than possessions. Yesterday I overheard a snatch of song, a woman lamenting life in "a three bedroom prison." That's what so many houses are where spouses do not love God and one another.

These old proverbs recall a memory from childhood. Into a modest house near ours moved a family of six--father, mother and four grown or nearly grown sons. The Great Depression still gripped the country. For the masses life was hard, money was scarce and possessions were few. These folks had no dining room chairs. They sat on field crates that one of the lads, artistically inclined, had decorated.

Their home was filled with love and laughter. They truly enjoyed one another. I never heard quarreling or cursing from that home. At our house, by contrast, flaring tempers, angry quarrels and frequent fights were as common as potatoes. We had more and better furnishings, but I envied their joy and peace and love.

"A fatted calf with hatred," will choke us on every bite. "Turmoil" makes all possessions a mockery. With love, a limited menu becomes a feast. "All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast." Grant us, O Lord, cheerful and loving hearts!

## 48. A Timely Word

*...how good is a timely word!* (Proverbs 15:23).

"A timely word"--a word "in due season" (NKJV)--is the right word to the right person in the right situation.

The Lord's words are always timely for his knowledge of those to whom he speaks is perfect. It is difficult for his people to speak timely words, for so much of others and even of ourselves is hidden from us. Nevertheless, he has promised wisdom to those who seek it, and his Spirit can guide our thoughts and prompt our words.

He has spoken timely words to all of us in various situations. Sometimes he speaks through specific scriptures, sometimes through people, and always from love that seeks our highest welfare.

We know from experience that a timely word may not be what one wishes to hear, but it is what one needs to hear. We know, too, from experience that a timely word is not always what one wishes to speak but needs to speak. We can understand the reluctance of God's prophets to speak words of rebuke and warning and judgment. Such words often bring alienation and rejection to the speaker.

How good when a timely word is spoken and heard in love. It averts tragedy, changes lives, honors God and helps us. Timely words lessen pain and grief and loneliness. Thank God for the gifts of love, wisdom and communication that birth timely words. Thank God for those who speak them.

## 49. Moral Distance

*The Lord is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous (Proverbs 15:29).*

"Far" describes moral distance, not spatial. The Lord is near enough to call the wicked to repentance and challenge them to faith. He is near enough to hear the penitent's confession and forgive the confessor's sins. He is near enough to smite in judgment the unyielding rebel. "Far" is not a distance that comforts the stubborn sinner.

God does not fellowship the wicked. He is not present to them as he is to the righteous. He is not present and intimate as the supplier of love, peace, courage and triumph in life's trials and tribulations. He is not present to hear the prayers and fortify the lives of those who live in defiance of his will.

The righteous, those who are justified by faith, live in blessed communion with him. They are his conversation partners. He delights to speak to them and to listen to them. They are on his wave length. It pleases him when they pray (15:8); it secures them when he answers.

"Humility comes before honor" (v. 33), both in the scale of values and in the experience of God's people. Humility occasions our prayers; honor results from his answers. Prayer reflects our dependence upon him. Answered prayer evidences his loving interest in us.

Draw near to us in grace, O Lord, that we may draw near to you in worship.

## 50. Weighing Motives

*...motives are weighed by the Lord (Proverbs 16:2).*

The Lord does not judge us as we judge one another. He judges intentions; we judge performance and achievement. He considers the motives that underlie actions and consequences. We stress what; he accents why.

Intended good may have bad, even tragic, outcome. U. E. Harding's mother intended good when she doctored his eyes. The medicine she used proved to be corrosive and blinded him. He was the victim of genuine but ignorant love.

Apparent good may issue from evil intentions. Wishing to con a lonely widow, a man may be attentive, gracious, concerned and affectionate. His outward actions will seem good and kind, but his hidden reasons are evil.

Motives can be masked, but not from God. He knows when good deeds flow from good hearts, and when they spring from selfish, conniving, evil hearts--and he judges accordingly. Why the words were spoken, why the actions were taken and why the favors were bestowed are as plain to him as what was said, done and given. It was this truth that made Jesus such a threat to the scribes and Pharisees who hated and opposed him.

In the Lord's sight, we all live in roofless houses. He knows us through and through. He judges our actions by our intentions, forgiving our blunders and condemning our deceptions.

Lord, grant us grace to be sincere and wisdom to be helpful.

## 51. Invincible Sovereignty

*The Lord works out everything for his own ends--even the wicked for a day of disaster (Proverbs 16:4).*

Does this reduce people to mere puppets or pawns? No. The whole tenor of Scripture teaches that we are "wicked" or "righteous" by choice. What this proverb declares is that divine sovereignty cannot be defeated by human sin.

The Lord has just said, "Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed." We cannot commit to the Lord any plans that contradict his will. He will not stamp with approval or bless with success that which opposes his "own ends." He will not surrender his sovereignty. When our plans conform to his ends, they will be done in his name and for his glory--and he will bless them.

The wicked cannot usurp his sovereignty. It is the anvil on which their hammers break. Some argue that unless all are saved, God's love is defeated. But his purpose is to save those who believe. His declared will is heaven for pardoned sinners, but hell for impenitent, unbelieving and unforgiven sinners. A "day of disaster for the wicked" as surely expresses his lordship as a day of reward for the righteous.

The Lord cannot be exploited or manipulated. He cannot be deceived or defeated. Ours is an awesome choice, to be his allies or his enemies. Choose we must. He has put the ball in our court.

## 52. A King's Wrath

*A king's wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it (Proverbs 16:14).*

In ancient times a king held absolute sway. From his decisions there was no court of appeal. Thumbs up, you lived; thumbs down, you died. It was that simple and often that brutal. To learn that the king was angry with you was to receive a death threat if not a death sentence. To cross a king was to sign your own death warrant.

Because kings were radically evil, as all men are, the cause for anger and death was not always just or even important. Capricious monarchs could order an execution for trivial reasons. Wise men did what they could to curry the king's favor and to allay his wrath.

The Lord is an absolute monarch, but his goodness and justice are untainted and enduring. His wrath is holy, aroused only by sin, and sin brings death. Nothing we can do will atone for sin, and thus save us from death. In his limitless love Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. By trusting in him, by abandoning ourselves to his mercy, we are saved from wrath.

They are wrong, and even false, who appeal to God's love to deny his wrath. He hates sin and it will not go unpunished if men refuse to repent and believe. Throughout Scripture his wrath is affirmed. Be wise enough to seek the one refuge from that wrath.

### **53. Honeyed Talk**

*Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones (Proverbs 16:24).*

Honey is a great food. During World War II, when sugar was rationed, we substituted honey in many recipes, producing foods both tasty and healthy

The Lord is telling us that what honey is to the body, pleasant words are to the soul and the body--both sweet and strengthening. Have we not often witnessed the healing effect of pleasant words and the destructive effects of unpleasant speech?

Words of love, of kindness and of encouragement have made us better persons in all our relationships to other persons. In the family, in the workplace, in the classroom, we are better persons. God will sweeten and strengthen a man to be a better spouse, a better parent, a better friend, a better workmate and a better disciple of Christ.

Not only are our lives richer for hearing pleasant words, they are greatly improved by speaking such words. We are happier and healthier for speaking words of appreciation, encouragement and gratitude to others.

"Pleasant words" are truths spoken in love, not insincere and flattering speech calculated to ingratiate oneself with others. Dishonest speech in honeyed tones is destructive still. Truth told harshly and coldly can be as harmful as lies. How we say things is just as important as what we say. Lord, help us to speak pleasant words today!

## 54. The Refiner

*The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart (Proverbs 17:3).*

Silver and gold are refined by fire. Impurities are removed and pure metal remains, its value enhanced by its purity.

What men do with precious metals God can do with the inner lives of believers. Malachi called him "a refiner and purifier" of silver and gold, whose refining work makes possible righteous offerings (Mal. 3:2-4).

The degree of purity which men can affect in metals is amazing. How loath are many to believe that God can cleanse the heart from all sin. They have more confidence in the skill of human artisans than in the power of the divine savior.

I recall a Sunday morning in California when I proclaimed God's power to cleanse his people's hearts. Among those who sought that inner purity was a metallurgist, who said, "I should have seen this truth long ago, given the nature of my work."

We do not blink the power of sin. We know how deep-rooted and longstanding is the corruption in a man's heart. But grace triumphs over sin, not merely to suppress it but to destroy it. The fire of the Spirit's presence can purify our hearts until we reflect the refiner's image.

## 55. A Warning

*Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs than a fool in his folly* (Proverbs 17:12).

All fools cannot be dismissed as harmless cranks. Some are as vicious and destructive as an angry, savage she-bear.

No one plans to meet a bear robbed of her whelps. Anyone truly sane would give such a critter a wide berth. An innocent hiker might have such an unexpected encounter, and his life would quickly be at risk.

The fool here warned against is not the intellectually deficient person but the morally and spiritually deficient one. He is the man who denies God, not with his lips necessarily, but in his practical affairs. He daily lives by the maxims and values of this world, a world in rebellion against the will and wisdom of the Almighty.

His folly includes his pseudo-wisdom, all the specious arguments and rationalizations by which he strives to mask his rebellion and to justify his God-denying life. Such a fool and his folly are extremely dangerous, especially if he is brilliant, eloquent and "successful." He gains too easily the attention, respect and envy of those uninformed by the word of God and unattached to the God of the word.

Lord, keep us from the fool and his folly. Grant us the wisdom of your word for our daily path. We don't want to become bear-food.

## 56. Miscarried Justice

*Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent--the Lord detests them both* (Proverbs 17:15).

Simple justice is God's will for all nations. He is often grieved by miscarriages of justice. Those that spring from ignorance are bad enough; far worse are those engineered by clever lawyers, lying witnesses or venal magistrates.

In our nation, thousands of guilty criminals have "walked," their cases dismissed because of some legal technicality. They openly laugh at prosecutors and witnesses and victims. Sometimes the guilty are acquitted because "money talks" and "power corrupts" and fear intimidates. Sometimes they are acquitted because they belong to the right lodge, to the right party or even to the right church.

The flip side of the record plays the same wicked tune. The innocent are sometimes condemned because power structures need scapegoats; sometimes because the accused poor cannot hire adequate counsel; sometimes because judges and juries are too racially biased to want the truth, much less to seek for it.

Whatever the reasons, justice often miscarries. In the end, however, no one will get by with anything. Jesus suffered the greatest injustice ever perpetrated, but Calvary's victim will be every person's judge, and from his judgment there will be no escape and no appeal.

His forgiveness is our hope. For bearing our sin and for providing our pardon, we thank you, Lord

## 57. Good Medicine

*A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones* (Proverbs 17:22).

Years of visiting hospital patients have confirmed this proverb. The cheerful mended more quickly than the doleful. They survived serious injuries and grave diseases when gloomier victims languished and died. Their mental and spiritual resources made a difference in recovery rates. How vital to health are our moods.

Think of how often the Lord Jesus said to troubled people, "Be of good cheer;" (translated in most English versions today as "Take heart.") Sometimes these were his first words. He knew that unless people cheered up, their downcast souls would effectively deafen them to anything he wanted to say.

Crushed spirits find it hard to think, to pray or to believe. Their mental energies are so focused upon the hurt that all else is blocked out. When self-pity is added to physical distress the burden is intensified.

God will give us cheerful hearts. We can take joy in who he is and what he does. We can live with the attitude, "Tomorrow will be better." Like Jesus, we can encourage the stricken. We can speak words and do deeds that brace those who are near collapse. Cheer is contagious. Lord, make us "carriers" of cheer.

## 58. A Puzzling Proverb

*Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he hold his tongue (Proverbs 17:28).*

Some find this proverb puzzling.

For one thing, when we put together all that Proverbs teaches about fools and words, it seems that keeping silent is precisely what the fool cannot do. "A fool...delights in airing his own opinions" (18:2). It is "a man of knowledge" who "uses words with restraint" (17:27). A silent fool seems an oxymoron.

Another thing: Proverbs emphasizes the communication of wisdom by way of words and instruction. Why then would silence be seen as a mark of wisdom?

Another thing: The proverb seems to commend the creation of a false impression. This is out of joint with the frequent accents on truth and sincerity in this book.

The puzzled are surely misunderstanding something here. But then, there are a number of apparent contradictions in this book of ancient proverbs. Do they reflect, and speak to, the contradictions and complexities of life?

We are reminded of Ecclesiastes 3:7: "a time to be silent and a time to speak." Wisdom, surely, lies in knowing what time it is. As the fellow said, whose proposal of marriage had been instantly accepted, "It's easy to say too much." Help us, Lord!

## 59. Unfailing Refuge

*The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe (Proverbs 18:10).*

The Lord's name identifies him. It is a shorthand way of designating all he is and does. It distinguishes him from all other and lesser "lords," and stands for a love, wisdom and holiness which are infinitely perfect.

His name is a refuge for the unrighteous. Sinners, menaced by judgment and weary of bondage, find refuge in what the Lord has said and done to provide their full and free salvation. How well we know; how glad we are that this is true.

His name is a refuge for the righteous as well. Those whom he has forgiven and adopted never lose their need for his protection and defense. When tempted and tried, they are sustained by fleeing to him, not by trusting in themselves. The world boasts of self-confidence. For the strongest that is a fragile reed. Security is found in the character and conquests of the Lord.

History has rendered obsolete the "strong tower" metaphor. We now have weapons capable of penetrating and leveling the strongest fortresses ever erected. Nonetheless, the truth endures: The Lord is the adequate defense of all who find their identity and security in him. We wisely hurry to him when the enemy approaches.

## **60. A Favored Man**

*He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord (Proverbs 18:22).*

A biased woman or a happy husband must have written this proverb.

It reminds us that Proverbs is a collection of wisdom sayings that are generally true, with sometimes frequent exceptions. It is contradicted by Proverbs 21:9 and 19. A wife is not always a blessing from the Lord.

I've known some good men who were driven from the ministry by bad wives. I know men whose lives are sheer misery because their wives are untamed shrews. The reverse is also true, of course. Many good wives are coupled with sorry husbands who make the marriage a nightmare.

Personally, I must praise God for the truth of the proverb in my case. Finding a wife was the best thing that ever happened to me, next to finding Jesus as my savior. Doris is a treasure enhanced through more than sixty-seven years of marriage. I never tire of her company, and I am a better man and minister than I would have been without her. She has enriched my life and gladdened my heart in ways too numerous to count.

## 61. The Friend

*...there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother*  
(Proverbs 18:24).

Brothers do not always stick close to each other. The first brothers mentioned in the Bible were not close. Abel, the younger was murdered by Cain, the older. The first homicide was a fratricide. The first pair of twin brothers was not close. The younger, Jacob, robbed the older, Esau, and had to flee the family home under his victim's threat to kill him. Joseph's many brothers were so jealous of him that they sold him as a slave to a passing caravan of Egyptian traders. The Old Testament has a number of stories in which blood brothers spilled their brother's blood.

David and Jonathan were friends and closer than brothers. Jonathan saved David from the murderous wrath of his own father, King Saul. Their friendship may have inspired this proverb.

Perhaps all Christians read this aged proverb and think immediately and joyfully of Jesus. He placed himself in this proverb when he said to his first disciples, "I call you friends." No one sticks closer than Jesus. He promised, "I will be with you always," and church history is the continuing story of his fulfillment of the promise. He never lets us go, never lets us down, and never lets us alone. He is our only savior, and he is our best friend.

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## 62. Foolish Rage

*A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the Lord (Proverbs 19:3).*

I visited a dying man in a Georgia hospital who was just thirty-six years old. He had smoked heavily since boyhood and now lung cancer was killing him. He seethed with anger against God, accusing him of being unfair because he was leaving a lovely wife and precious children.

On my second visit I hushed his harsh outpouring of anger. "Did the Lord ever offer you a cigarette? Did the Lord ever extend a lighter to ignite your cigarette?"

"No," he admitted grudgingly.

"Were you never warned of the possible harm, even lethal harm, that smoking could cause?"

"On every pack," he confessed.

"Who, then, is really responsible for your condition?"

"I am," he ruefully admitted.

"And the Lord you have railed against loves you, and even now offers you forgiveness and heaven," I reminded him. "He doesn't want you to waste two worlds."

I am glad to tell you that he trusted in the Lord and died in peace. When those who have created their own misery turn from rage to repentance, pardoning mercy is God's priceless gift to them.

### **63. A Prudent Wife**

*Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the Lord (Proverbs 19:14).*

These days a prudent wife is hard to find. Women are absorbed with proving their equality to men, and the men they ape are "fools"--corrupt, lustful, violent and god-denying. If a man wants a prudent wife he had better seek her in a prayer meeting, not at a single's bar. And he needs to hang around prayer meetings long enough to become conversant with God and changed by God; otherwise he won't be a fit husband for a good wife. Indeed, prudent women wouldn't marry morally unfit men.

Parents can will possessions to their children, but they cannot bequeath character to them. When due recognition is given to the influence of heritage and environment, character and behavior, whether good or bad, wise or foolish, are the products of personal choices.

A prudent wife is one who has chosen Jesus as savior, friend and guide. She is the product of his grace. She obeys his word, adopts his values and models his compassion. Such a woman is indeed "from the Lord."

Blessed is the man with such a wife. She is a greater asset than property and wealth.

## 64. The Lord as Debtor

*He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done (Proverbs 19:17).*

What a staggering thought! The Lord becomes a debtor to those who help the poor. He repays them with interest because he is the lover and defender of the helpless under classes.

All who help the poor are not motivated by kindness. Taxpayers do it, but often resent paying the taxes that provide welfare programs. Politicians do it to secure additional votes when campaigning for office. Sometimes husbands do it grudgingly, urged by compassionate wives whose empathy they do not share but whose favor they desire. Unkind help doesn't qualify for the Lord's "reward."

The reward given by the Lord may not be repayment in kind. Those who give material help to the poor may be rewarded by spiritual blessings from the Lord. Think of Mother Teresa. Who in our lifetime has shown more kindness to the poor? She remained, by choice, poor in material goods. Yet who was richer in love, joy, peace, and communion with God?

We are debtors to his grace forever. Let us so live that he becomes a willing debtor to us. Lend him more by doing more to help the poor.

## **65. "Man Proposes, God Disposes"**

***Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails (Proverbs 19:21).***

**Many of my plans have been shelved. Many of my projects are unfinished. Sometimes I lost interest, sometimes I lacked money, sometimes I realized that I was mistaken, sometimes I met interruptions or interference. For whatever reasons, I've had to scrap or change a lot of plans.**

**The Lord's purposes prevail. His wisdom is perfect. He foresees all contingencies. He overcomes all opposition. Nothing can successfully contradict his will. With him, to plan is to achieve, to purpose is to prevail.**

**We need to agree with his purposes; we need to accept his plans for our lives. Otherwise, we set ourselves up for frustration and self-destruction. By ignoring his plans we waste our lives.**

**We are both wise and safe in submitting to his purposes. He plans, achieves and rules in love. He knows and wills what is best for us. To do his will is to find maximum pleasure and fulfillment. With the psalmist we should pray, "Teach me to do your will."**

## **66. To Keep from Straying**

***Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge (Proverbs 19:27).***

**This proverb was spoken in times long past by some unnamed father. We read it today as the heavenly Father's words to us.**

**Because of who he is and where he is, he can see the whole path of life much clearer than we can see the next step. His guidance, therefore, is our security.**

**He guides us by his word, the Bible. If we stop listening we will stray into all kinds of trouble. We need guidance daily, therefore we must daily consult the Scriptures and listen carefully as God instructs graciously. He will illumine our pathway and strengthen our steps as we continually hear and heed his voice.**

**We are his sheep; he is our shepherd. As we hear and heed his voice we are well provisioned and well protected. If we ignore him we will soon stray into danger, eating locoweed and drinking poisonous water.**

**Straying is always a temptation, never a necessity. Your word provides ample truth and light for our lives. We have access to it and time for it. We have no excuse for straying, and if we stray we have no defense against ruin.**

**Lord, strengthen my resolve to daily study the Bible. There I find the instruction of the greatest Father for his weakest son.**

## **67. A Hellish Traffic**

***Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise (Proverbs 20:1).***

**Recently I saw a boy try to purchase a six-pack of beer at a grocery store. Asked for ID he presented a driver's license and claimed that the birth date recorded on it was wrong by five years. If he could know what miseries and tragedies are ahead in the life-style he has chosen, he would flee the path at once.**

**I thank God that I was never led astray by alcoholic beverages. I have witnessed the degradation and destruction wrought by drinking them, and it has made me their enemy forever.**

**The beverage alcohol industry never advertises its finished product. They refuse to accept blame for the broken minds, bodies, marriages, homes, careers, and dreams that drinking has caused. They have caused as much devastation and sorrow as the costliest wars ever fought. Every day people are injured and killed by drunk drivers. Every day people are weeping beside graves dug by booze. Cemeteries, hospitals, prisons, and asylums are filled with alcohol's victims.**

**Only greed allows the carnage to continue. Venal politicians and avaricious businessmen defend what has no true defense. Lord, increase my hatred for this hellish traffic.**

## 68. The Divine Cleanser

*Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?"* (Proverbs 20:9).

The obvious answer is no one, with the single exception of Jesus. "All have sinned," and we cannot cleanse and keep ourselves from sin. There are no self-remedies for the malady of sin. To attempt any is to compound one's sin, to add pride to all other corrupting attitudes and actions. "Self-realization," so popular today, is not salvation. The self realized by these psychological programs is a self still alienated from God and defiled by sin.

Many have used this proverb to rationalize a shabby moral life. Scripture is replete with affirmations of God's power to cleanse us from all sin and to empower us for holy living. What we cannot do for ourselves he can do for us. What nature cannot do, grace can. God can purify the springs of conduct and keep them undefiled. He can radically transform human life, making wicked men good and defiled men holy. Our moral challenge is not simply the admission of guilt and stain, but the appropriation of cleansing and keeping grace.

What is impossible to us is gloriously possible to God. "Blessed are the pure in heart" for they have seen him as the one who cleanses and keeps.

## **69. A Rare Jewel**

***Gold there is, and rubies in abundance, but lips that speak knowledge are a rare jewel (Proverbs 20:15).***

**Rare jewels do exist. God has given to some the ability to learn and to speak in ways that enlighten and inspire others. Such teachers are rare, but enough of them have served God's purposes to make our ignorance inexcusable. Such persons know God and know us well enough to be competent spiritual guides.**

**Most of us have been greatly helped by a host of good teachers. We are grateful to God for them. They have helped us to be better servants of the Lord, the gospel and the church. They have enriched our minds and improved our work by what they have said and written.**

**That God supplies the church with wise and gifted teachers creates our responsibility to learn. We must listen to them, maintain a teachable spirit, and allow their words of knowledge to increase our skills for kingdom service.**

**The lips that speak knowledge are first of all the persons, known and unknown, who wrote the Bible. May the Lord keep us especially attentive to them.**

## 70. Shun the Gossip

*A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much (Proverbs 20:19).*

Popular thought has associated gossip with women. The Lord knows that men gossip too. Too many men talk too much. Let's not swell their number. Let's keep reins on our tongues.

The proverb implies that too much talk leads to gossip. He who is always talking invariably resorts to the betrayal of confidences and the spread of rumors. People's ears are his targets and people's lives his victims. No one's secrets or name is safe with the gossip.

The proverb directs us to shun the gossip because he will betray our confidences, and because we are not helped by hearing the confidences of others betrayed. My father-in-law used to say, in refusing to listen to gossip, "My ears are not a dump. Keep your trash out of them." He lived this proverb and was a better man for it.

I preached a quiet man's funeral. One of his young friends said, "I never heard a bad word about him or a bad word about others from him." Most gossip would end if we refused to say anything behind another's back that we wouldn't say to his face.

The rumor mill is a useless machine. What it produces can only harm us. Avoid known gossips today.

## **71. Righteousness Beats Rituals**

***To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice (Proverbs 21:3).***

**Here the sage echoes the prophet. From Samuel to Malachi the prophets denounced rituals in the absence of obedience. "To obey is better than sacrifice." God does not accept the worship of those who sing and pray on Sunday but lie, cheat and oppress on other days.**

**Many business and professional men who are "leading members" of their churches fill the locker rooms of golf courses with corrupt speech and actions that belie their Sunday behavior.**

**Some mistreat their families, friends and customers and then flawlessly perform worship routines. Their "sacrifices" are attempts to bribe God. To the abuse of people they add the slander of God, compounding their sins and insuring his judgment.**

**Scripture teaches that our relationship to God is no better than our willed relationship to others. We can't be right with him and wrong with them. We can't read the Ten Commandments on Sunday, break them through the week, and expect God to accept and bless us. Our hymns and prayers and offerings insult him if we refuse to live a "holy, righteous, and blameless" life among believers and before unbelievers.**

## 72. Profit and Poverty

*The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty (Proverbs 21:5).*

This is true economically. Few stumble upon fortunes. Instead, they carefully plan their careers and investments. They set goals and adopt strategies that will enable them to succeed. They do not go through life hit or miss, but pursue their dreams with doggedness and wisdom.

The man who has similar goals, but takes shortcuts and sidetracks will ultimately fail. The man who hurries through his work because he is addicted to play will also fail. In the world of business and industry, the diligent rise and the careless fall.

The proverb is true spiritually as well. If we wish to live for God's glory we must be diligent in our pursuit of "the means of grace." We cannot flip through the Bible, seize a verse out of context, scan it without reflection and application, and expect God's word to nourish and sustain us. We cannot hurry through our prayers to get to the television set or tennis court and expect to have genuine communion with him. We must set some priorities and form some habits that will bring maximum spiritual benefits to our hearts.

We have time for God. If we clutter our lives with lesser matters we can allow the appearance of busyness to be an excuse for neglecting spiritual disciplines. But God knows and we know that we really do have time for him. Let us make wise and good use of it

### **73. Space and Peace**

***Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife (Proverbs 21:9).***

**One night I read this proverb to a crowded church and some woman shouted out, "That's not in the Bible"! How shocked she must have been to discover that it occurs twice, being repeated in 25:24, with a similar sentiment expressed in 21:19. Whoever wrote or collected these proverbs either had marital problems or lived near someone who did.**

**Space can contribute to peace. One of my professors used to admonish his students with these words, "If you can't get along with others, just get along down the road." Put space between yourself and the person you can't tolerate. That's good advice.**

**Better than isolation, however, is transformation. God's grace can so change us that we become easy to live with. Until that happens, however, many a home and marriage could be saved from utter ruin by practicing this quaint portion of ancient wisdom.**

**A good wife is fun to live with. A shrewish one lends strong appeal to divorce or death. We should enrich the lives of our spouses every day. Never quit courting. Never quit complimenting. Never quit consoling. Attic rooms and desert retreats have no appeal when those we live with are unselfish and considerate.**

## **74. Hearing and Being Heard**

***If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered (Proverbs 21:13).***

**Once again the Bible teaches us that life boomerangs. What we do to others will be done to us. If we give we will be given. If we forgive we will be forgiven. If we withhold mercy, mercy will be withheld from us. Our fate is bound up with others. God will treat us as we have treated them. We determine our own judgment by what we do with the blessings God bestows upon us.**

**God's word has just affirmed, "The Righteous One takes note of the house of the wicked and brings the wicked to ruin." To ignore the cries of the poor is wicked; indifference to their suffering is heartless behavior. That it leads to ruin is no surprise, given the truths of God's love and justice.**

**We must keep our hearts tender and our hands open to the poor. In their cries we should hear God's voice calling us to share. When we cry to him our prayers could be drowned out by the pleas of the poor that we ignored. Let's live by the golden rule, not by the rule of gold. Lord, help us to give the shape of your cross to our response to hurting and hungry people.**

## **75. Evil-intentioned Worship**

***The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable--how much more so when brought with evil intent! (Proverbs 21:27).***

**Men with evil intentions may practice religion. Outwardly it does not differ from the actions of those who worship God sincerely. The same hymns are sung, the same prayers are prayed, the same scriptures are read, the same creeds are repeated, and the same rituals are observed. Outwardly, all looks the same. Inwardly, there is a polar difference.**

**The evil-intentioned worshiper is radically selfish. He is deceitful to the core, and his worship is a scam. He may be a politician seeking the votes of religious people. He may be a bunco artist seeking prey among the moneyed elderly. He may be a salesman hoping to add the church to his customer list. He may be a lecher hoping to bed a deceived woman. He may even be a preacher, eager to impress the unwary in order to keep his own nest well-feathered. In any case, he wants to be perceived as God-fearing and church going, and not seen for the greedy deceiver he really is at heart.**

**The Lord sees our hearts. No one can deceive him; no one can scam him. Intentions are as transparent to him as are actions. Persons and churches may be fooled and victimized, but God will bring swift, righteous and appropriate judgment upon evil-intentioned worshipers.**

## 76. The Lord of Battles

*The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord (Proverbs 21:31).*

The Lord determined the outcome of Israel's battles. To deliver and preserve his people, he often gave them victory. To judge and chasten them, he sometimes allowed their defeat. He is the Lord of all the earth, including its battlefields. He is the Lord of history and he determines its outcome.

Recognizing his sovereignty did not exempt his people from the responsibility of preparing for and fighting in the battles. He did not grant victory to people who were indifferent to their own fate. He expected courage and commitment, obedience and trust.

A preacher can benefit from this proverb. He can ready the horse. He can study God's word and the people's lives. He can structure sermons and choose words. He can deliver messages, utilizing talents given and skills learned. But whether truth becomes light; whether people are convicted of sin and converted to Christ; whether they yield their lives to his will and work--only the Lord can bring that about.

To us belongs the acquisition of knowledge and its application to life. To the Lord belongs the anointing that makes it all effective. D. L. Moody had the formula right--"My human best, filled with the Spirit."

## 77. Money, a Destructive God

*A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold (Proverbs 22:1).*

The writer does not label "great riches" undesirable. He knows that many have forfeited self-esteem and the respect of others in their pursuit of wealth. By shady associates and crooked deals they made money, only to lose their "good name." They lost a reputation for honesty, integrity and fidelity and no measure of wealth can compensate that loss.

Money becomes a god when sought for its own sake, sought as the *summum bonum* of life. It is a god that consumes its devotees. It blinds and enslaves. It destroys precious human relationships. It reduces people to objects. Love of money is the root of many evils, all of them defiant of God and ruinous to us.

To trade a good name for great wealth is a bad bargain. What is exchanged is soon regretted but rarely recovered. Once gone, it's usually gone for life. Wealth brings power but not peace; it creates fear but breeds hate--a sorry bargain, indeed.

Jesus spoke of how hard it was for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. To miss the kingdom is to become a pauper at last. Let's keep our heads and hearts straight about money. We can't buy what we most need.

## 78. Rich and Poor

*Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is the Maker of them all (Proverbs 22:2).*

As their maker, the Lord is the savior and judge of rich and poor. None of them can be saved except by his grace. Neither poverty nor wealth creates merit. Mankind's only hope of salvation is the atoning death of Jesus Christ. Both rich and poor will stand before his judgment seat. Riches cannot bribe the judge; poverty cannot excuse our sin. The ground is level before the cross and before the throne of judgment.

Since the Lord is the maker of rich and poor, the church must see them both in that light and seek to reach both with the gospel. A place in its fellowship must be made for each, with no favoritism displayed. The church cannot despise the poor or toady to the rich without condemning itself. Persons are not to be valued for their economic status, but simply because they are God's creatures, the objects of his love and subjects of his rule.

We must see rich and poor in this same light. We must love both and be ready to offer Christ to both. We must not justify the sins of either or regard either as beyond the reach of grace. In this we will follow Jesus, who visited with both and served both. What they have in common is more significant than how they differ.

## **79. A Proverb for Parents**

***Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it (Proverbs 22:6).***

**Treating this proverb as a promise has created a severe crisis of faith for some faithful Christian parents. Proverbs are observations on how things usually happen and they have exceptions. God's promises have no exceptions. They come true for he cannot lie.**

**He does not promise that all children properly taught and raised will live and die in truth and faith. Generally, adults will live by truths and values learned as children. Some, however, forsake the moral training of Christian parents to pursue paths of wickedness to their ultimate destruction.**

**When children forsake God and live wickedly, all parents can do is wait and hurt and pray and hope.**

**We must not charge God with failure. We must not abandon our children to evil. We must continue to love them and to pray for their return to God. Our ministry of child-training may be over, but our ministries of enduring love, ceaseless prayer and faithful example continue.**

**God loves our wayward children. He does not coerce their decisions but he influences their choices. That is the ground of our hope.**

## 80. King and Friend

*He who loves a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for his friend (Proverbs 22:11).*

Pure-hearted and gracious-spoken rulers have been few and far between. Few rulers would select pure-hearted and gracious-spoken men as their friends. Either things are worse today or else the proverb was written during the reign of an exceptional monarch.

The proverb has had a very limited application. Only a few such men have ever lived and served in royal circles. Most of the pure-hearted and gracious-spoken people in a kingdom would never meet the king, much less become his intimate friends.

There is a king, however, who is aptly described by this proverb and who gives it wide application. The heart of Jesus is pure and his speech is gracious. He "did no sin" and his words are "spirit and life."

The Lord has power to cleanse our hearts and to sweeten our words. He promises heart-cleansing and life-changing grace to those who come to him. He extends personal friendship, with all its benefits and blessings, to each person who follows him.

Incredible as it seems and sounds, we have the king for a friend!

## **81. Work-dodgers**

***The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside!" or, "I will be murdered in the streets!" (Proverbs 22:13).***

**A man who wants to avoid work can readily find or invent excuses to do so. He can cite dangers abroad, animal or human, to justify remaining at home, often glued to the television set. He can become a hypochondriac, imagining or feigning a variety of illnesses that incapacitate him. He can excuse himself from the workplace to attend numbers of funerals, and show up at the ballpark instead.**

**Aversion to work was once viewed as disgraceful. These days the successful work dodger is applauded as clever. The government will support sluggards by the thousands, and spend millions of dollars to hire social workers who validate the sluggard's excuses or declare the sluggards "psychologically unemployable."**

**To live by the labors of others when one is able to work is a form of theft. The sluggard is a criminal, not vicious but nonetheless despicable. He should be given the apostolic option--work or starve.**

**The Lord will freely forgive the sluggard who repents, just as he forgives all penitent sinners. The sluggard who refuses to change will never know him as savior.**

**Thank God for work and the will to work.**

## **82. Teaching and Trusting**

***So that your trust may be in the Lord, I teach you today, even you (Proverbs 22:19).***

**Wisdom that does not teach us to trust in God is miscalled. It reduces to knowledge, and does not prepare for authentic living because it ignores the primary relationship in life, our relationship to God. Teaching never qualifies as wisdom when God is denied, ignored or opposed. Education has been increasingly secularized in our country. By statement and by implication many educators deny God's existence or relevance. Such men are learned fools posing as sages.**

**Those who trust such teachers instead of trusting God are doomed to ultimate failure. Hell does not reduce its heat or segregate its population in deference to Ph.Ds.**

**Teaching and trusting are vitally linked. Teaching informs trust and trust completes teaching. As the Gospel of John declares, "These are written that you may believe..." Divorced from trust in the Lord, teaching is ultimately wasted.**

**Let us trust in God, not in godless teachers, godless lessons or godless learning. We thank God for teachers, curricula and knowledge for these have enriched our lives. None of them can save us, however, apart from personal trust in God. If they lead us no farther than themselves we remain lost.**

### **83. Boundary Stones**

*Do not move an ancient boundary stone set up by your forefathers (Proverbs 22:28).*

Men sometimes stole land by furtively moving boundary stones. In Israel such theft invited the "curses" of the covenant with God that governed the nation (Deut. 27:17). The action had a spiritual application. When Judah's leaders countenanced, and even encouraged, idolatry and immorality, they were "like those who move boundary stones" in God's eyes (Hosea 5:10). He poured out his wrath upon them and withheld his blessing from them until they repented.

We live in days when spiritual boundary stones are being moved. Teachers and preachers within the church are altering the doctrines of historic, orthodox, biblical Christianity. They mask their crimes in scholarly language, pretending to be messengers and defenders of the very truths they deny. They deceive the unwary and ultimately deceive themselves. They cannot hoodwink God.

Like Job, we sometimes wonder why these boundary stone movers are not swiftly punished (Job 24:2). If their judgment seems delayed, it is nonetheless inevitable. God does keep covenant, honoring both its blessings and curses. The stones will be set again in their rightful places. That is our confidence when we face the betrayals of gospel and church. Let us keep faith with God and honor the ancient landmarks. Amen.

## 84. Riches and Restraint

*Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint (Proverbs 23:4).*

A man complained, "Rich foods and fine clothes were all I thought about when I was young. Now I am old, sick and flabby. Nothing I eat agrees with me and nothing I wear looks good on me."

To live for things is to insure disappointment. The man who destroys his health in pursuit of wealth will spend his riches on doctors and medicines--or he will be too broken and jaded to enjoy his riches. Riches can disappear before one's eyes. They can take flight like an eagle. God endures. People endure. To insure happiness one must live to honor God and to help others. The selfish and secular will have no enduring joy or fulfillment.

Wisdom is expressed in restraint. The wise person takes time to enjoy the glory of God, the beauty of nature and the majesty of friendships. Enough work to live well, enough rest to preserve health, and enough worship to know God makes life good.

The idea that riches satisfy dies hard. Those who live for riches die poor--poor in spirit, in friendships and in matters of eternal consequence. To live at peace, to die in peace, to meet judgment with peace--these are far greater in value than all material wealth.

## 85. Heart Life

*Do not let your heart envy sinners.... My son, give me your heart...(Proverbs 23:17 19, 26).*

The heart that envies sinners is unwise and shortsighted. The righteous have "a future hope" (v. 18), the wicked do not. The profits and pleasures of the wicked are "for a short time" (Heb. 11:25), but the righteous will live forever in God's "better country," a place unmarred by sin, sickness or sorrow. To envy the present of one who has no future is folly, indeed.

The heart that obeys God is on the right path. The path may wind through some rough places, but it leads to him, to peace and to heaven. Hedonism leads to hell. Beyond the party lies the pit, the dumping ground of wasted and ruined lives. What awaits at the end of the road determines the value of the journey. The Lord is our way and our goal. Avoid detours.

How can we keep our hearts from envy? How can we keep my feet on the right path? The answer lies in God's invitation/command: "Give me your heart." When he possesses our hearts, the adulterous and drunken ways of the world cannot take it captive. The "deep pit" (v. 27) and the "mixed wine" (v. 30) lose their appeal, for God alone satisfies the heart's deepest hunger.

## **A Priceless Treasure**

***Buy the truth and do not sell it (Proverbs 23:23).***

**The Lord is the truth and his word is truth. If we trust him, as he is revealed to us in Scripture, we have bought the truth. This is the truth that frees from sin. This is the truth of eternal life. By giving the Lord our hearts (v. 26), we "buy the truth."**

**We buy it to keep it, not to trade or resell it. Men sell what they have bought in order to make money, in order to increase their wealth. The Lord is life's supreme treasure. Nothing is of greater value than knowing him. Without him the richest of persons are paupers. Their palatial homes are but mausoleums. Their extravagant orgies are but *rigor mortis* setting in. In all that matters most they are bankrupt souls destined for misery. To give up the Lord for anything or anyone is a fool's bargain.**

**Men also sell what they have bought in order to enhance their pleasure. Fellowship with the Lord is measureless joy. The righteous have "great joy," not the wicked (v. 24). To walk with the Lord is both to have joy and to give joy. His people rejoice even when suffering (Rom. 5:3).**

**The Lord's presence is our joy, and "eternal pleasures" are "at [his] right hand" (Psa. 16:11). Who would part with this for the short-lived pleasures of sin"?**

**The way to maximize profit and pleasure is to "buy the truth and do not sell it."**

## 87. A Wise Man

*A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength (Proverbs 24:5).*

A wise man, in the parlance of Scripture, is not simply an educated man. True, he is "a man of knowledge," but this knowledge is not mere book-learning. The wise man is first of all the man who knows God as his creator, savior and lord. Above all else he values and does God's will. This involves him in building relationships that are governed by unselfish love. He practices Golden-Rule living in all situations. Into God's service, then, he brings all the academic lore and all the experiential lore that he has accumulated. Otherwise he would be an educated fool, and no less a fool for having degrees and pedigrees.

A wise man has great power, for by prayer and faith God's power is channeled into his life. He will not "falter in times of trouble" (v. 10) because God's strength upholds him. He will speak with authority "in the assembly" because God's wisdom informs him. He will wage warfare successfully because God's "advisors"--the writers of Scripture--give him counsel adequate for victory (v. 6). Looking to God, he can see through "the schemes of folly" (v. 9), and thus avoid sin. Power to discern and to do God's will when he is assaulted by evil forces, is the asset of a wise man.

Lord, make us wise!

## **88. Rescue the Perishing**

***Rescue those being led away to death... (Proverbs 24:11).***

**All around us are persons being led away to death, for sin brings death.**

**Some are led away by their own lusts. They rush blindly into soul-traps, eager to satisfy urgent sensual desires.**

**Some are being led away by manipulative exploiters, too gullible to realize that they are being conned by tempters posing as friends.**

**Some are being led away by false messiahs and religions that prey upon the need to be saved but cannot deliver from sin and death.**

**Some are young and lack the wisdom to discern good and evil. Some are senile and lack the strength to counter-attack the enemy.**

**God has called the church to rescue missions. God has summoned us to champion the poor, the sick and the lost. "Rescue the Perishing" is more than a gospel song; it is a Christian mandate. We must do what lies within our power for "those staggering toward slaughter."**

**What the church must do, each believer must do. Group effort does not absolve us from personal effort. Let us not refuse to rescue someone because we cannot rescue everyone. Lord, give us a passion to help, to serve, to rescue--a passion that will burn through lethargy and apathy. Hold us to this proverb, Lord.**

## 89. Priorities

*Finish your outdoor work and get your fields ready; after that build your house (Proverbs 24:27).*

Effective living is a matter of priorities--"first things first." A farmer could sit in a well built, well furnished house, with no crops planted, no wood cut, and he would starve and freeze. Shelter is important, comfort and beauty are not to be despised, but food and clothing from the fields are of utmost importance. No starving man lives in a comfortable house.

For spiritual life, the Lord's word is our food. We cannot live without it. We cannot learn of him without it. We cannot mount an adequate defense against temptation without it. We cannot discern the way to heaven without it. We can do without many things, but God's word is essential.

We need that word daily. Life is daily. All men, whether they live wisely or unwisely, live a day at a time. Tomorrow is not guaranteed. Any day could prove to be our last. Millions have died surprised. We can hope for added days but we can't compel them. Besides, if we live badly today we will be unfitted for the challenges of tomorrow, should it come. So as we face this day let us pray, "Give us our daily bread."

Let us treasure our time with God and the Bible. Keeping our priorities straight will keep us in his word

## 90. Live and Learn

*I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw... (Proverbs 24:32).*

"Live and learn" is a trite phrase but good advice. All observe but not all are observant. One looks and learns; another looks and fails to learn. As a consequence, one strides through life, another stumbles through life.

Learning is more a matter of application than aptitude. We must apply our hearts for what we see to become a lesson learned. No flash cards appear with the moral appended to what we observe. We must see action and consequence and draw a conclusion. In context, the wise man saw that idleness bred poverty and concluded that work was a blessing.

We can't learn without observing but we can observe without learning. Thousands continue to drink, smoke and gamble when they have repeatedly seen the consequences of these addictions. Thousands continue to backslide despite the many times they have witnessed the destructive results of neglecting the means of grace.

Only the applied heart can benefit from the observing eyes. Do not let us look without learning, Lord. We want to live effectively and helpfully. May we keep our eyes and hearts open today!

## 91. Keeping Secrets

*...do not betray another man's confidence...(Proverbs 25:9).*

Those who cannot keep secrets wreak havoc in human relationships. When someone trusts us enough to bare their souls, we are highly privileged. To betray their confidence is to spit upon their friendship, to mock their call for help.

Above all people, preachers should be confidence keepers. Confidences should never become sermon illustrations. When a pastor is buried, hundreds of secrets should share his grave.

A "bad reputation" is the earned reward of those who betray confidences. They will soon be labeled gossips and forfeit the opportunities they once had to help hurting people.

Those who confide in known gossips really want the "secret" spread, whatever contrary desire they pretend. Those who want the confidence kept have honored the confidant with a trust that only silence can preserve.

"A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (v. 11). The word spoken that should have remained a secret becomes garbage. The gossip dumps garbage; the willing listener is the dump.

"Silence is golden," people say. Where confidences are kept the Golden-Rule is being practiced.

## 92. Visit Rarely and Briefly

*Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house--too much of you and he will hate you (Proverbs 25:17).*

A wise man long ago said that company was like fish, after three days they stink. No one wants a steady diet of fish, either. When visiting in the homes of others a good rule is not too often, not too long.

Even good people can wear out their welcome. An old adage warns, "You can get too much of a good thing." You can also get too much of a good person.

Without an invitation, a visit can be an intrusion, an invasion of privacy. It can disrupt a family's plans, interrupt a family's discussion and create resentment. An "open door" policy is not good for a family's life. Each of us likes to think he or she is good company. How could anyone groan to see us coming up the walk? "Too much of me"--surely not! We have only to think of how others affect us to know how we affect them. The Golden Rule would keep us from visiting too often, from staying too long.

Few of us want even our close friends to visit us constantly. We have neighbors we enjoy seeing every day, but we are seldom in each other's house. Don't spoil friendships by knocking often at others' doors.

### 93. Defenseless

*Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control (Proverbs 25:28).*

An unwalled city in those days had no defense. A city whose walls were broken down had been defeated in warfare. Unless the walls were quickly repaired the city would become ruins. Those who dwelled in such a place would be easy prey for marauding bandits or savage animals. Until Nehemiah and his colleagues rebuilt the walls, Jerusalem was a perfect and pathetic example of this truth.

The man who lacks self-control is defenseless and will be ruined. Anyone can provoke him to anger. Anyone can light his fuse with slight provocation. His fears swiftly govern his actions and reactions. He becomes a man whose behavior is determined by other people or by unhappy circumstances. He lacks moral compass and moral power. He may get along well through stretches of time, but sooner or later someone or something will cause him to "blow his stack" and lose whatever moral ground he had gained. He is at the mercy of others who tempt him or situations that frighten him.

Self-control is good. God-control is better. Lord, by your Spirit occupy the control centers of our lives. We don't want to be ruled by emotions, appetites or circumstances. We want to be shaped and guided by your grace.

## 94. Answering a Fool

*Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes (Proverbs 26:4, 5).*

These statements read like contradictions. Two things are evident, however: we are not to become like the fool; we are to relieve the fool of self-deception. This calls for cautious responses to incautious statements.

We become like the fool if we respond to his folly with foolish answers. He has succeeded, in that case, in dragging us down to his level. He has determined the quality of the conversation and made us his victims.

A girl, provoked by the preacher's sermon, confronted him in the center aisle of the church. They engaged in argument that descended into name-calling. He stood there, red-faced and out of control, replying to each name she called him with a similar one for her. The whole scene embarrassed the people who saw and heard the exchange. He answered a fool according to her folly and became like her.

A wise answer to a foolish statement holds some hope of changing the fool. It undeceives him, reproves him, and offers a better course of action. This is the sense of these proverbs. Lord, help us to learn from them.

## **95. Folly--Isolated Lapse or Ingrained Habit?**

*As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly*  
(Proverbs 26:11).

The commission of a foolish act does not make a person a fool. The repetition of folly does. Even the wisest of persons occasionally do foolish things. The fool is one who keeps on doing them until folly is his habit, his life-style. This truth is abundantly illustrated in the Bible.

He is wise who learns from his mistakes; he lives better in the future than in the past. He is a fool who simply repeats his mistakes, learning nothing and stupidly defending himself against those who seek to "wise him up" for his good.

The simile in this proverb is not elegant--a dog lapping up its vomit--but the lesson is vivid. Unlike the animal that is governed by instinct, we are to be ruled by reason. Better still, we are to be ruled by what God teaches in his word.

The fool may spout God's words; the wise man will reflect upon them and act upon them. "A proverb in the mouth of a fool" doesn't cure his folly. He is still morally crippled (v. 7) and morally deceived (v. 9). It is the proverb in the heart, not the proverb in the mouth, that changes and controls life.

Lord, we do want to live by your words. We want them for our guidance and defense. We will make mistakes; keep us from turning them into habits. Wise us up, Lord, that we may honor you.

## 96. Evil Hearts, Fervent Lips

*Like a coating of glaze over earthenware are fervent lips with an evil heart (Proverbs 26:23).*

An evil heart combined with fervent lips has an awesome potential for deception and destruction.

Adolph Hitler combined evil intentions with fervent speeches. His harangues turned audiences into mobs who robbed and killed those he named as enemies of the German state. Those harangues, wearing the guise of patriotism, plunged the world into war.

Joseph McCarthy combined evil intentions with fervent speeches. Posing as a champion of democracy threatened by communism, he recklessly accused and destroyed hundreds. Lying about his own past and his own ambitions, he slandered mercilessly all who opposed him. He had a following of thousands who took his words for granted; they were unable to investigate him and unwilling to believe those who did.

Recent years have witnessed smooth-talking preachers who were living like devils while they postured as spokesmen for God. Their lust and greed finally collapsed their empires, though many gullible disciples continued to hail them as persecuted victims.

Few things are more dangerous than men of evil hearts with the ability to make fervent speeches.

Lord, help us to match honest hearts and honest words. Help us to choose reality, not appearance, as our goal.

## 97. A Humbling Ignorance

*Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth (Proverbs 27:1).*

A pastor preached from this text one Sunday morning. That very day, as a family from the church sat at their dinner table a car crashed through the house and came to rest within inches of the startled diners. They were spared injury, but the incident forever engraved this proverb upon their minds.

We should not take time for granted, for tomorrow is not promised. The Lord's language is "today." Today repent. Today believe. Today obey. Today seize the opportunities given to witness and help. He may say to us what he said to the rich man in Jesus' parable: "This very night your life will be demanded from you." Then we will leave the things on which the world places value, and all that will matter is our personal relationship to God.

We should not take people for granted, for they may be torn from our lives at any time. We must do what we can for them now. The affection and service we postpone may become lost opportunities forever. Let us do today what we can. Let us say today what we should. Let us live today as we will wish to have lived if tomorrow doesn't come.

Life takes surprising turns and comes to sudden halts. Its uncertainty is beyond our control. All our plans for the future must be stamped "God Willing."

## 98. When Hurting is Helping

*Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses (Proverbs 27:5).*

Unexpressed love helps only the lover. We need to be loved by those who care too much to remain silent when they see us taking a ruinous course of action. Blessed are those who have such loving friends.

God loves us like that. He often expresses his love in open rebuke of decisions and actions that would have destroyed us. He warns us about attitudes and words and acts that would damage others and ruin us. We seldom welcome or enjoy reproof, but we often need it. God gives it, not because he takes any pleasure in watching us squirm, but because he wants to make us better and wiser persons.

Man of us have friends have loved us like that. Reluctantly but firmly some have taken us to task when we were wrong in spirit or in speech. We have learned from personal experience that "Wounds from a friend can be trusted." Those who flatter are never as valuable as those who rebuke. The human heart tends to invite flattery and repulse criticism, but such self-protective strategies are ultimately self-destructive. Thank God for those who have loved us enough to compel us to take candid looks at ourselves. Helping sometimes requires hurting.

## 99. Good Intentions, Good Sense

*If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse (Proverbs 27:14).*

Intended good can be self-defeating unless it is done with common sense. A sleeping man doesn't want to be loudly blessed by a right-hearted but wrong-headed neighbor.

This proverb always recalls my folly as a new Christian. Aping some believers in whom I had placed great confidence, I formed the habit of praying loudly. My private devotions were quite public. One morning my mother, not then the Lord's follower, functioned as his servant. She reproved me for disturbing the neighbors with my high-decibel prayer and praise. "Is God hard of hearing?" she asked, and added quietly, "You don't have to yell to get your earthly father's attention." That very day an old man who lived around the corner from us told me, "I heard you praying when I came down the street from my work last night." His tone of voice did not indicate admiration or approval but amused disgust. I realized the folly of my habit and discarded it immediately.

Good intentions must be served by wise methods. Otherwise we defeat our own purposes. We become our own enemies, something none of us can afford. We cannot help people if we adopt ways and means that needlessly anger or embarrass them. Lord, grant to us common sense as well as good intentions. Amen.

## 100. A Quarrelsome Wife

*A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day; restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand (Proverbs 27:15-16).*

If you did not learn this truth from personal experience, thank the Lord and your wife. When I read this ancient comment I remember an elderly couple who moved to our community and attended our church when I was a young Christian. He was retired and, according to her, a bit off in the head. He sat for hours on a bench in the shade of a tree, staring forward and saying nothing. Meanwhile she would be puttering around the yard, tending the grass, shrubs, and flowers and nagging him with every breath. About every fifteen minutes he would say, "Oh, shut up." That was his only and invariable response, made without changing expression.

When he saw me walking by, though, he would grin, jerk a thumb in her direction, and shake his head. I always wondered which one of them was really mentally deficient.

A quarrelsome man or woman has deep unresolved conflicts that keep them agitated. Unhappy with themselves they lash out at others in self-defense that is self-deceiving. They can rob a home or a church of peace. Trying to help them is usually as futile as trying to catch wind or grasp oil. Only the Lord can change them.

## 101. Showers Good, Floods Bad

*A ruler who oppresses the poor is like a driving rain that leaves no crops (Proverbs 28:3).*

Rain is vital to crops and rulers are necessary to society. Too much rain, however, can destroy the crops, and oppressive rulers can ruin their nations. The very thing that is good in proper measure becomes bad when overdone.

History is replete with crop-destroying floods. We have witnessed many in our nation. We've seen lands awash, houses floating and animals perishing. We've seen fortunes lost and people broken by too much of a good thing.

History is also replete with oppressive regimes that victimized the poor for the sake of the rich. National government needs checks and balances and moral champions who can avert such tragedies. Just laws impartially administered are crucial to the political and social health of any nation. Exceptions have been the rule in human affairs, thanks to the avarice and violence native to fallen human nature.

The Lord is a ruler who exalts the poor. He raises the poor man from the ash heap and sets him among princes. His love is perfect and his justice impartial toward all persons, whatever their economic status. So far from being oppressive, he is unfailingly gentle, not breaking the bruised reed or quenching the smoking lamp. He is the ruler after whom all rulers should aspire. Alas, they do not, and society suffers.

## 102. Character Matters, Wealth Doesn't

*Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a rich man whose ways are perverse (Proverbs 28:6).*

Character matters, wealth does not. That is the simple truth of this proverb and illustrated in many lives.

While the Lord's name is unmentioned in the proverb, it is central to its truth. Throughout the wisdom literature the blameless walk is a walk with him, the path of obedience to his word. The perverse way is the chosen path of a godless person, who scorns the Lord's definitions of goodness and wisdom for his own.

Character is a matter of grace. There are men who live decent lives, even rich men who do, without including God in their lives. His grace, conferred upon all men, counteracts the heart's native wickedness and enables persons who do not serve him to incorporate solid moral values and develop sound moral habits. All goodness owes to grace, not to nature.

Perverseness is the essence of sin. Human life without God, human life opposed to God, is perverse even when it is decent. He made us for himself. Without him riches cannot satisfy and perversity will finally damn. The good done by perverse men will not save them from sin and wrath. Their wealth will be wasted and their souls destroyed.

Much or little of things is inconsequential. A right relationship to God is all that really matters.

### 103. To Find Mercy

*He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy (Proverbs 28:13).*

Sins are never concealed from the Lord, only from other people. There is no escape from judgment, therefore, except God's mercy. God delights in mercy and is quick to forgive.

To find mercy one must be done with sin. It is not enough to confess it; one must quit it. Confession alone brings no mercy; to confession must be added renunciation. Those who plead for mercy and expect forgiveness while they fully intend to resume their condemned practices are only deceiving themselves. They are presuming upon a mercy they will not receive, and compounding an evil for which they will be judged.

Many "go to confession" regularly who never reform their lives. What they spill to the priest they do not intend to stop doing. Yet they count on absolution, and are assured of forgiveness, with reckless disregard for God's word.

The renunciation of sin does not merit forgiveness, but it conditions forgiveness. It expresses faith in the power of God's mercy to change one's heart and life. That faith is never disappointed, for whom God forgives he also renews. He is a mighty savior.

## 104. The Praise Trap

*Whoever flatters his neighbor is spreading a trap for his feet (Proverbs 29:5).*

Flattery is insincere praise. Either it lauds virtues that the flattered do not possess or it expresses a delight that the flatterer does not feel. It is speech designed to put one off guard so that the flatterer may use him or her for personal advantage. When someone flatters us we are not objects of admiration, we are targets of exploitation. If our heads are turned by flattery, they are too loosely swiveled.

Flattery is the spreading of a net, the setting of a trap. It is intended to catch the unwary in order to enrich the trapper. It is never the last word but a setup for the last word. The last word will be a request for something the trapper desires--money, service, approval or whatever. Those who enjoy flattery are easy prey of the flatterer.

The surest defense against flattery is to think of ourselves "with sober judgment"--to borrow a phrase from Paul. A good look in the mirror of God's word will keep us from being deceived by anyone's flattery. Someone once said that flattery was soft soap and soft soap was mostly lye. Knowing the truth about ourselves will keep us from being netted by the flatterer.

God's word does not flatter. If we keep close to it we will not be duped by the deceitful words of others.

## 105. Pride and Humility

*A man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honor (Proverbs 29:23).*

Pride is man's attempt to exalt himself in the sight of others. It is self-defeating, for the more he thinks of himself the less others think of him. Uncle Bud Robinson used to say that pride was the only disease that made everyone sick except the fellow that had it.

If the proud man wields power he may be flattered by toadies, but he is respected by no one. Remember Benito Mussolini? He strutted and boasted as few rulers have done, and the fearful gave him praise. But when he lost his power and fell into the hands of the people, they showed him what they really thought of him. They killed him and hung him up like a butchered animal.

Scripture teaches that God exalts the humble and resists the proud. His resistance is enough to overcome the strongest among the proud. He laughs at the noisy threats of the proud and mighty rulers of earth. From their high places he tumbles them down and tramples them underfoot as history runs its course.

The mightiest of all was the humblest of all, and God exalted him to heaven's throne. God gave him the name of Lord over all. Never was God's judgment upon pride and his approval of humility more clearly demonstrated than in the resurrection of Jesus.

## 106. The Soul Trap

*Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe (Proverbs 29:25).*

D. L. Moody said that more people will be lost forever because they feared someone than for any other reason.

Many wives have hungered for Christ, but refused to seek him because their wicked husbands disapproved. Many children were eager to be saved but kept from Christ by their godless parents. Many young people steeled themselves against Christ because they feared their peer groups. Many men rejected Christ because they feared the ridicule of their work-mates. It happens over and over. The fear of man is indeed a soul trap.

Trusting God is the cure for such fears. He will keep the believer safe. This does not mean safe from trouble or even safe from persecution, for many of his people have endured maltreatment at the hands of the godless. He keeps them safe from the snare that would destroy their souls. The man who trusts in him will brave prison, torture and death rather than succumb to the threats of those who defy him.

Deliverance from sin brings also deliverance from the fear of man. The redeemed will serve God no matter who or what opposes.

## 107. Flawless Words

*Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him (Proverbs 30:5).*

This fellow Augur (vv. 1-4) seems to have been a weary skeptic, doubtful that the transcendent God can really be known. We have met him several times under various aliases.

The answer to him is God's words. God has spoken to make himself known, and if men and women will give attention to his words they will know him to the degree that human creatures can know their creator. Further, they will know him in the most important way, as a savior, as "a shield to those who take refuge" in him.

His revealing and redeeming words are flawless. They are like refined metals, precious and durable, proven true in life's rough and tumble. They cannot be improved by the addition of our flawed and feeble words (v. 6). They need no support; they need no defense; they need only to be trusted.

Those who trust God's words will find them true. He will answer to the portrait of himself found in Scripture. He will keep the promises made to his people, saving them from sin and securing them against evil forces that oppose his words and works. Life will be right and good for the happy people whose faith is grounded upon God's flawless words.

## 108. A Special Environment

*Coneys are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags* (Proverbs 30:26).

A marginal note in my Bible says "the hyrax or rock badger." We don't know exactly what this creature is, but then, we don't know exactly what we are either. We know that we are "creatures of little power." If we had to make it on our own, our enemies would destroy us.

These coneys, badgers, whatever they are, survive because they utilize their environment to achieve security. "In the crags" they can scurry about and hide away, scarcely seen by larger and stronger animals that want to prey upon them. They compensate for their smallness and weakness by the wise use of environment.

We have a special environment that provides for our nourishment and defense. God is that environment. We feed upon his words for maximum spiritual strength. We take refuge in him when "the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." In our trials and temptations he becomes our security and he assures our victory.

Believers are "in Christ." As a fish is environed by water, as birds are environed by air, so we are environed by Christ. With St. Patrick we can say, "Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left..." Lord, you are our environment, our atmosphere! In this we rejoice today.

## 109. Keeping the Peace

*For as churning the milk produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife (Proverbs 30:33).*

Many people today have never churned milk and made butter. Some have never had their noses bloodied by a bully's twisting. Even those so favored by fortune realize that a hard wringing would result in nosebleed.

The proverb rings a bell in this writer's memory I was often guilty of "stirring up anger" with my brothers and my friends. I stupidly started fights I couldn't finish and provoked fellows I couldn't whip who felt no compunction about decking me for my folly.

The "for" which begins the proverb extends the remark made just prior to it: "If you have played the fool and exalted yourself, or if you have planned evil, clap your hand over your mouth!" Anger is aroused and strife is produced when one exalts himself. Others do not share his warped opinion and weary of seeing it paraded. Consequently, they reach a boiling point and the battle is on. Planned evil, when it is detected, issues in the same reaction. People are angered and respond forcefully.

The lesson is plain, Lord. If we desire to "live in peace with all men" we must be humble and harmless. We must be persons of controlled speech and gentle disposition. Your grace alone can make us such persons. Let grace abound!

## 110. Spokesmen Needed

*Speak for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy (Proverbs31:8-9).*

This is a proverb for all elected representatives of the people, Lord. Among the constituents of our presidents, lawmakers, and judges are those destitute of material goods and shorn of political power. They need champions who will voice their grievances and demand their rights.

Too often, the representatives are in the pockets of the rich. They augment the oppression by special-interest laws and actions that increase the wealth and power of the oppressors. Rare is the man with adequate compassion and courage to challenge the movers and shakers of our world.

The church should speak for those who cannot speak for themselves, confronting their oppressors with prophetic courage. Your word, in its challenge to impartial justice, should be trumpeted aloud so that all rulers and leaders may hear. Unfortunately, too many churches and preachers have become the allies of oppressors, justifying whom they should condemn, patronizing whom they should summons to repentance.

Lord, help us to be spokespersons for those who cannot defend themselves. No risk is too great, no person is too small, to warrant the investment of our time, energy and resources in opposing evil and helping "the poor and needy."

## 111. A Rare Jewel

*A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies (Proverbs 31:10).*

The question implies that such a woman is rare. This is just as true today as in the day this proverb was written and the wife of noble character described. She is portrayed as intelligent and industrious, unselfish and supportive, and possessing dignity and wisdom, courage and faith. She toils for her husband and children, providing them with food, clothing and instruction. She deserves and receives their grateful praise (vv. 11-29).

If such women are scarce, even scarcer are men who deserve such love, respect and support. That the husband of noble character is nowhere described in Proverbs tells us something about the male-dominated culture in which the writer and collector of Proverbs lived.

There are many such women today. They are devoted to their husbands and children. They are kind to neighbors, always ready to help them through their troubles. They live for the Lord and for their families with unfailing love. They bless every life they ever touch. They don't get the publicity that crude and selfish celebrities receive but they keep the world from utter rot.

Some of us were fortunate to be raised by and married to such women. We are obligated to live as they have lived.