

Proverbs, III

In thinking about helping the poor, which is an issue that came up in the last lecture, how do we prioritize our actions? How do we go about doing something since we cannot do everything? I was in Uganda where what I could have offered monetarily would not have been, perhaps, rightly applied if I just started handing out money. I needed to remember what I was there for: spiritual service, which is really more important in that situation. And the native Christians said it was more important than monetary aid. And yet we also had to be wise in terms of working through certain leaders in the churches. You have to be wise. But what I learned it that it is wrong to erect a barrier and say poor people deserve to be that way. That is not the case, and to say that may dishonor their Maker. I have a British friend who grew up in Kenya. He is very interested in the continent of Africa and has spent some time there. He also worked for the World Bank, so he understood financial things. He said one of the problems during the Ethiopian crisis was that they would send down large amounts of powdered milk. Sometimes such a large amount of powdered milk would arrive that two things would happen. It would put any struggling milk industry immediately out of business because milk would have no value since they had just gotten this huge shipment of milk. And second, many times they would end up lining their soccer fields with this milk powder. They had more milk powder than they needed. What they really needed was help in establishing themselves. They did not need the handout as much as they needed help establishing themselves. So my friend spent his time going around doing training on crop rotation and the proper use of fertilizers and such. We want to be wise in what we do.

Let us just touch on a few more themes in these first nine chapters. One that really strikes me is what I call teachability. Proverbs 9:7-12 says this:

Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult;
 whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse.
 Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you;
 rebuke a wise man and he will love you.
 Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still;
 teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.

This passage contrasts a wise person and a mocker. A mocker does not receive rebuke well, but a wise person does. That is to say, a wise person is teachable. Proverbs 17:10 says, “A rebuke impresses a man of discernment / more than a hundred lashes a fool.” There are temptations in our lives to think that we can learn much only from certain people, and from some other people we can learn very little. That is a mistake. As seminary students we are also tempted to think, “I have arrived. I have a master’s degree and I am the one who knows this stuff. I do not learn from people who have not achieved this qualification.” That is a grave mistake and a sign of a lack of wisdom. We should be open, teachable and open to rebuke. Now, there is a right way to rebuke, a right way to correct, and a right way to make constructive criticism, speaking the truth in love. When we are dealing with one another we want to do it in that spirit, but a wise person is open to that and is thankful. “A rebuke impresses a man of discernment / more than a hundred lashes a fool.” And how are we able to be open to rebuke? We have to be secure enough in the Lord that someone can say, “I do not like the way you are doing this,” or “I think you are erring in this area.” And we can say, “You are right. I will try to improve, believing that God accepts me.” Or, perhaps, “Having prayed about this and having sought other counsel, I do not agree that this is a problem in my life. But thank you for your concern and willingness to approach me.” God is not finished with us yet, and we should be willing to receive that rebuke and appreciate it when it is constructively given.

Right after I got out of language school in Germany, my German was not great, as you can imagine. I had a lot of passive knowledge that I had learned in the classroom, but I had not had to activate much of it. And yet, as I listened to older missionaries speak, because I had just been studying all the grammar, I could pick out the grammatical errors they made consistently. I could say, he is using this preposition with the wrong case—the dative case instead of the accusative—because I had just been studying that. But they would never have considered asking me for help with their German. They were the ones who were fluent and I was the one who needed help. They would never have begun to think that they needed to be teachable by me. But I could see their flaws. Sometimes we older Christians need to realize that the younger Christians, the babes in Christ to whom it is all fresh and new, could correct us and remind us of the basics. They might be able to see where we have been practicing something wrong. Thus we need to be teachable. Once we realize that God wants us to be teachable, that makes it much easier to receive criticism. Now, sometimes people criticize us in hurtful ways and we need to have the courage then to say, “I take your point, but could you say it in love?” And that is fair. But teachability is a theme in these chapters.

There is also something in these early chapters that reminds me of the Song of Songs. Proverbs 5:15-23 sounds very much like Solomon’s Song of Songs:

Drink water from your own cistern,
 running water from your own well.
Should your springs overflow in the streets,
 your streams of water in the public squares?
Let them be yours alone,
 never to be shared with strangers.
May your fountain be blessed,
 and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
A loving doe, a graceful deer—
 may her breasts satisfy you always,
 may you be ever captivated by her love.
Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress?
 Why embrace the bosom of another man’s wife?

For a man’s ways are in full view of the LORD,
 and he examines all his paths.
The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him;
 the cords of his sin hold him fast.
He will die for lack of discipline,
 led astray by his own great folly.

This passage, talking about the wife of your youth—and I think we can also apply this to your husband—does not say, “Learn to live with her (or him); get along with him. You are stuck now. Everyone knows that marriage is a lot of work, pain, and toil. And everyone knows that it just gets harder as the years go by.” This passage does not use that kind of imagery. It does not say, “It is your duty to love your wife, so do it.” It says, “May you ever be captivated by her love.” The question is how can that happen? How can we actually be captivated by the love of this person whom we live with all the time? There is no easy answer to that, of course, but I think it begins with respecting that person and really showing love to that person, loving them according to 1 Corinthians chapter 13, and accentuating the positive. I know that my wife could look at me and find many things that I do that irritate her. She could have focused on my bad points and they would have become worse every year, and I could have

done the same with her. But by God's grace we have learned to appreciate each other. Having a bald husband, my wife claims to have learned to dislike hair. She says, "I do not like men with hair." I know she is not completely serious, but I love it when she shows her love for me in that way. We can focus on the negative aspects of our spouses or we can focus on the positives and watch what God can do as He strengthens their good points. There is nothing more delightful than to be able to say, "Not only has she been good for me, but I have been good for her." And truly, love can grow. Howard Hendricks talks about his intimacy with his wife in their first 20 years of marriage as a 20-year warm up. That is not the wisdom of the world. The world says it goes from bad to worse, and at best you end up in a silent sort of cold war. If you stick with the marriage, it is because you are a dutiful person. But that is not what this passage says. It says, "Be captivated by her love," and that is what we should strive for.

If the wonder of a captivating relationship being possible—something we can strive for—is not enough to motivate us, then we have the reminder in Proverbs 5:21: "For a man's ways are in full view of the Lord / and he examines all his paths. / The evil deeds of the wicked man ensnare him; / the cords of his sin hold him fast. / He will die for lack of discipline, / led astray by his own great folly." I do not think there are many who have engaged in sin and who later are glad. Our sins, what we think of as our exercise of freedom, do end up ensnaring us. I was talking to a young man in my office who was lamenting the way a certain thing had gone. He felt guilty for some things that had happened, and you could tell that if he could erase that past he would very readily do it, and life would be far simpler. Proverbs says, "The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him." I am not calling this friend of mine a wicked man, but I am using him as an illustration to say that we really can weave a tangled web. We should look beyond the immediate gratification that temptations to sin appear to present and realize where that will all lead and the difficulty that will be ours in unraveling it. And besides all this, our ways are in full view of the Lord. While we are on the subject of marriage, do not underestimate your weakness, those of you who are married. Do not think, "That could never happen to me," because anything can happen to any of us but for God's grace. I read a very tragic story of a Christian minister who was attracted to a young woman in his congregation. He thought she would never be interested in him, and so he allowed himself to spend some time with her working on different projects. He got to know her and enjoyed her company because he knew that she was the safety. She was the guard, she was the gate; she would stop him because she would never be interested in him. But one day he discovered, to his sort of frightened surprise and partial delight, that she was in fact interested in him. The problem was, by that point he was leaning toward her expecting her to hold him from falling. And when she opened the gate even a crack he fell. Do not underestimate your weakness. Keep those safeguards; keep those fences well erected.

Let us move on to the next section, which begins in 10:1. This is the section that is comprised almost exclusively of short, one-sentence sayings. Furthermore, in the first six chapters (10-15) we have a large proportion of antithetical parallelisms. In these antithetical parallelisms, the second half of each verse begins with "but." That is indicative of an antithetical parallelism. Proverbs 10:1, for example, says, "A wise son brings joy to his father, / but a foolish son grief to his mother." These have a pattern of this, but that: the righteous..., but the wicked; the wise..., but the foolish. Many of the proverbs are structured this way through the first six chapters up to the end of chapter 15. Many have tried to discover an overarching structure for this section, chapters 10 through 22:16. This is called the Solomonic collection. The title, in 10:1, is "The Proverbs of Solomon." It can be very frustrating to try to outline this section because the topics of the proverbs seem to be very sporadic.

So outlining this section is a little frustrating and difficult. Some are convinced that we will never find any kind of coherent overarching structure. Remember we talked about Proverbs, especially this section, as being a place that we can turn to for little bits of instruction on many different topics. And that

remains true to this day. But the question is, is that all there is to be said? One does occasionally sense some kind of purposeful arrangement as we are reading through this—some sense that the placement of the proverbs is not merely random. There do seem to be little groupings, and sometimes there seems to be what I call vicinity repetition. One thing will be said, and then something else will be said in between, and then it will come back to that earlier theme. Let me give you a couple of examples. Proverbs 15:13-15 says, and notice the repetition here, “A happy heart makes the face cheerful, / but heartache crushes the spirit. / The discerning heart seeks knowledge, / but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly. / All the days of the oppressed are wretched, / but the cheerful heart has a continual feast.” Notice the repetition of the word “heart.” That seems to be intentional. Perhaps one saying reminded the compiler of another proverb relating to heart and so forth, and they were then joined together. Another example is 16:20-23 which says, “Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers, / and blessed is he who trusts in the LORD.”—here we have teachability again— / “The wise in heart are called discerning, / and pleasant words promote instruction. / Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it, / but folly brings punishment to fools. / A wise man’s heart guides his mouth, / and his lips promote instruction.” “Instruction” is repeated a number of times. It is obvious that there is a little chain of related proverbs given there, and I could give many other examples of that.

This raises the question of whether the collection is really random or whether there is a purposeful arrangement to these proverbs. That is an important question. We might say, what is the difference? If we discover that the proverbs are purposely arranged, how would that affect our interpretation? We could look for themes. Context would need to be considered in a different way. If someone purposely juxtaposed this proverb to the next proverb, then we have to consider what the purpose in that juxtaposition is. How is my understanding of a proverb affected by the one that went before it and the one before that? Rather than saying that there is no sense or structure—that there is no intentionality to this arrangement so that each proverb is an isolated saying—then the only context we can give for understanding them is to find other sayings that touch on that same theme and collect them together. This is what I did with the proverbs on wealth and personal property.

Let us look at 10:1-11 and see whether there seem to be indications of an intentional structuring or arrangement of these verses. It does appear on the surface to be rather random. There is one proverb after another, perhaps unrelated. But there seems to be an increasing sense on the part of people who are really studying this of an intentional structuring to this section. There are repeated words or phrases, such as in 10:1 and 5: “A wise son brings joy to his father, / but a foolish son grief to his mother.” Then verse 5 says, “He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, / but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.” In the Old Testament this sort of pattern is often what we call an enclusio—an envelope structure where you end where you began. You begin and end with the same theme so as to encompass or envelop a little unit. So that is an indication to think maybe this is some kind of unit. Notice that the wise son is described in verse 1 as bringing joy to his father, and the foolish son as bringing grief to his mother. In verse 5 we are still talking about wise and disgraceful sons, but it talks about the wise son gathering crops in summer and the disgraceful son sleeping through the harvest. In verse 5 the wise son is displaying his wisdom in his industry and in his timely ingathering of crops. The question is, is there any relationship between verses 1 and 5 and the intervening verses? Verse 2 says, “Ill-gotten treasures are of no value, / but righteousness delivers from death.” Maybe that is addressed to the wise son as well, talking about gain and treasures. Then verse 4 says, “Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.” We have “treasures” in verse 2 and “wealth” in verse 4. These both seem to be talking about the issue of how wealth can be earned—through evil means (verse 2) or through diligence (verse 4). There does seem to be something of a relationship. Notice that we are getting a structure: verses 1 and 5 more or less parallel each other, verses 2 and 4 to some extent parallel each other, and what is in the middle? Verse 3 says, “The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry, /

but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.” Again, this is talking about gain, provision, receiving what you need, and the satisfaction of hunger. Thus in this little unit, if that is what it is, at the very middle is a focus on the Lord. It is a chiasm: A1, B1, X (the central fulcrum, the most important thing to focus on), and then B2, A2. That is what we call a chiasm. The relationship between these proverbs is worth looking at because if we discern a unit then context suddenly becomes relevant.

In 10:6-11 we again encounter much repetition:

Blessings crown the head of the righteous,
 but violence overwhelms [or covers] the mouth of the wicked.
 The memory of the righteous will be a blessing,
 but the name of the wicked will rot.
 The wise in heart accept commands,
 but a chattering fool comes to ruin.
 The man of integrity walks securely,
 but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.
 He who winks maliciously causes grief,
 and a chattering fool comes to ruin.
 The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life,
 but violence overwhelms [or covers] the mouth of the wicked.

There again we see an enclusio. The unit began with the phrase, “Violence covers the mouth of the wicked,” in verse 6. Then verse 11 says, “Violence covers the mouth of the wicked.” This seems to be an indication that this is some kind of a unit. Inside that we have reference to the chattering fool coming to ruin. And in the center is verse 9, which says, “The man of integrity walks securely, / but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.” Verse 12 says, “Hatred stirs up dissension, / but love covers over all wrongs.” The verb rendered in the NIV in verses 6 and 11 as “overwhelms” is more literally translated as “covers.”

Verse 11 says, “Violence covers the mouth of the wicked,” then verse 12, the beginning of the next unit, says, “Hatred stirs up dissension / but love covers over all wrong.” This is a linguistic chaining together of these units, a catch word device, as it is sometimes called. It appears that verse 12 and the unit it introduces, if there is one, is intentionally linked to what went before. And there seems to be another enclusio and chiasm with verse 12 and verse 18. Verse 12, “Hatred stirs up dissension, / but love covers over all wrongs,” sounds the same as what we come to in verse 18: “He who conceals [or covers] his hatred has lying lips, / but whoever spreads slander is a fool.” We have “hatred” and “covers” in verse 12 and again in 18, and that is suggestive of a unit. Verses 13 and 14 say, “Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning, / but a rod is for the back of him who lacks judgment. / Wise men store up knowledge, / but the mouth of a fool invites ruin.” Then verse 17 says, “He who heeds discipline shows the way of life, / but whoever ignores correction leads others astray.” There seems to be some thematic parallelism there. Then at the center of that we have this very interesting juxtaposition of verses 15 and 16: “The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, / but poverty is the ruin of the poor,” and “The wages of the righteous bring them life, / but the income of the wicked brings them punishment.” Verse 15 is an observation, a statement of apparent fact. It was probably a saying that would have been known at that time and in that culture. But it is qualified or corrected in verse 16: “The wages of the righteous bring them life, / but the income of the wicked brings them punishment.” The idea is that the rich may view their wealth as a fortified city and the poor view their poverty as their ruin, but in fact wealth or poverty is not so much the issue. Rather, the wages of the righteous bring them life. Jesus promised us abundant life, and it could not promise that which He did not experience. And yet He did not have a place to lay

His head. Our lives are not consisted of things that we own. The rich are mistaken if they think of their wealth as a fortified city. We see this again in Proverbs 18:11: “The wealth of the rich is their fortified city”—an un-scalable wall they imagine it to be. This is another interesting qualification of 10:15.

This is just a taste of what I think will be increasingly more apparent as more and more people study these sections with this kind of question in mind. It is a little hard to do without learning Hebrew because sometimes you need to know the Hebrew to notice those catch words, but some of it you can do without that. So I encourage you to look for relationships and not just assume the arrangement is haphazard. I do not think it is, and I think it will become increasingly apparent as people continue to pursue that.

Let me tell you a couple of other things that I find fascinating about this particular section. In this Solomonic collection, 10:1 to 22:16, there are 375 proverbs. Why is that of interest? Well, 375 is the numeric value of the name Solomon. If you take the name Solomon in Hebrew and assign the number value to each of those letters, it comes out to 375. Is it possible that the central Solomonic collection having the number of proverbs that correspond to the numeric value of his name is intentional? I think it is possible. Just because we would not choose to do it that way in our own culture does not mean that an ancient Hebrew might not. Also, the letters of the English alphabet do not have numeric values assigned to them. We use Arabic numerals: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and we do not assign numeric value to the letters in our alphabet. But in Hebrew they do: *aleph* is one, *beth* is two, etc. If Solomon is the one who compiled his master collection here, he would have had some method of choosing which and how many of his 3000 proverbs to include. Solomon or a later compiler may well have chosen to use the numeric value of Solomon’s name.

Let me point out something else that is interesting. There is something curious about 16:1-9:

To man belong the plans of the heart,
 but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue.
 All a man’s ways seem innocent to him,
 but motives are weighed by the LORD.
 Commit to the LORD whatever you do,
 and your plans will succeed.
 The LORD works out everything for his own ends—
 even the wicked for a day of disaster.
 The LORD detests all the proud of heart.
 Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.
 Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for;
 through the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil.
 When a man’s ways are pleasing to the LORD,
 he makes even his enemies live at peace with him.
 Better a little with righteousness
 than much gain with injustice.
 In his heart a man plans his course,
 but the LORD determines his steps.

This is again an enclusio with verses 1 and 9 paralleling one another. And I think you could work out a little chiasm here if we were to take time to do it. But what is striking about this particular group of verses? The Lord is mentioned in all but one. Verse 8 is the exception that proves the rule. That is interesting because on average in this portion of Proverbs the name of the Lord, YHWH, comes up

about every seventh or eighth verse. But in this group of nine verses the name of the Lord appears in all but one. Why is that significant? Curiously, this set of nine verses is almost exactly in the center of the Solomonic collection. If you were to count all the verses before it and all the verses after it you would find that this section is within one or two verses of being right in the middle. Is that significant? I think it is. In 10:1-5 we saw the focus in the middle, verse 3, is on the Lord. For this whole collection this concentration on the Lord simply underscores what the motto has already said: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

There is more to learn about Proverbs. I remember once when I was working on my degree in Cambridge, a man came up to me and asked me what I was working on. I said, “I am working in the Old Testament.” He replied, “Is there anything still to be done there?” Believe it or not there is. There is much still to be done here, even just in adjusting ourselves to being able to see these things and beginning to understand that the way we write is not necessarily the way they would have written. I think as we do that we will learn new things. God has more truth to break forth from His Word than we have yet seen. It will not be different truth, but it will be enriching to us.