

# Preaching from Proverbs

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THE Book of Proverbs was once widely used as a source for ethical teaching in school and as a basis for sermons on the Christian life in church. Of its influence, George Adam Smith has said, "We cannot overestimate the effect which, at least until a recent date, the regular exposition of the Book of Proverbs, in church and school and home, has exercised upon Scottish character."<sup>1</sup> His words often apply equally well outside of Scotland, for Proverbs has played a major role in moulding common ideas of Christian ethics.

The modern minister, however, is apt to overlook this book in his preaching. The pragmatic matters of ethical and economic life with which it deals do not seem so significant as the theology of Paul. Moreover, the popular idea that its teaching has a purely utilitarian basis makes it suspect from the preacher's point of view. Yet Proverbs, when properly understood, is a storehouse of homiletical material providing texts for sermons, illustrations, and observations which may help the minister understand his people.

Sometimes the reader is puzzled about how to study and use this book. The first impression gained from reading it is of a series of unrelated verses; each verse deals with a new topic, and no steps of logic lead from one to the next. It is a kaleidoscopic survey of city and village life in the Palestinian landscape, but the scenes change so rapidly that they merge into a confused series of highlights and shadows with little meaning.

The sayings in the Book of Proverbs must be studied, as they were intended to be studied by the ancient writers, a few at a time. The method is illustrated in the *Story and Wisdom of Ahikar*, a wisdom book well known to post-exilic Jews. Ahikar, responsible for the education of his nephew Nadin, used to give him a few proverbs to study each day until the wisdom they contained might penetrate his mind and mould his character. The biblical proverbs, likewise, require this gradual process of study and meditation for an appreciation of their truth and their bearing on life.

The real glory of these sayings is that they are pictures taken from life. But they are not photographs which simply display the facts; they are portraits which show important details. Each one reveals a little facet of life as it really is in unmistakable clarity. Sometimes they present the harsh realities of existence that men are prone to ignore. Why should Proverbs contain

1. *The Preaching of the Old Testament to the Age* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1893), p. 30.

statements such as the following, except to remind men that this is the way of life and that it is important to recognize it?

A rich man's wealth is his strong city;  
 the poverty of the poor is their ruin (10: 15).<sup>2</sup>  
 Wealth brings many new friends,  
 but a poor man is deserted by his friend (19: 4).  
 A gift in secret averts anger;  
 and a bribe in the bosom, strong wrath (21: 14).  
 In a multitude of people is the glory of a king,  
 but without a people a prince is ruined (14: 28).

Wealth does bring security; the poor cannot afford the medical care that would lengthen life or pay the price which would keep their case from being taken to court. The great nations wield great power, but the little nations have many problems. Such sayings remind men to look at life realistically and not to act as if the messianic age had already arrived when the lion and the lamb might lie down together.

The Book of Proverbs does not merely present the facts of life in a neutral way. It shows its joys and its sorrows, its goodness and its badness. Consider the following:

Better is a dinner of herbs where love is  
 than a fatted ox and hatred with it (15: 17).  
 A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh,  
 but passion makes the bones rot (14: 30).  
 A gentle tongue is a tree of life,  
 but perverseness in it breaks the spirit (15: 4).

Such sayings picture the world with a balanced perspective, as a place where there are good motives as well as bad, and where there are friends as well as enemies. In their light the tremendous advantage of goodness over evil in conduct is made perfectly clear.

Moreover, this book elucidates the problems of life which the people of the parish face every day. To study Proverbs is to be brought into closer touch with the concrete issues which confront the members of a congregation at home and at work. It deals with children who bring grief to their parents, with youths who are only too susceptible to the temptations of life, with adults whose conduct destroys the life of a home. It warns men of the misery caused both for themselves and others by graft and greed, by short tempers and by revengeful spirits. It shows the lasting virtues and the richness of life which, by and large, belong to patient, industrious, honest folk who benefit from the lessons of experience and live with a quiet grace.

The question may be raised as to how the minister should deal with such matters from the pulpit and relate them to the central verities of faith. It is of no advantage to be brought face to face with a practical issue or a realistic observation by a verse from Proverbs if one is left floundering. But it is

2. Biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

surprising how often the candid study of a maxim does lead on to a consideration of its relation to central issues of theology and to the person and work of Christ. An example may be found in the saying, "There are friends who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (18: 24). The verse suggests that there are different levels of friendship. Proverbs speaks often of friends who play at friendship. Life is full of them; they crowd around the rich but desert the poor. Genuine friendship has a different quality. "A brother helped by a brother is like a fortified city; he holds firm as the bar of a castle" (18: 19).<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, however, a friend may remain loyal when even brothers fail. That is the sort of friendship Charles Kingsley meant when he wrote in *The Water Babies*: You must expect to be beat a few times in your life, little man, if you live such a life as a man ought to live, let you be as strong and healthy as you may: and when you are you will find it a very ugly feeling. I hope that that day you may have a stout staunch friend by you who is not beat; for if you have not, you had best lie where you are, and wait for better times, as poor Tom did.

This is the characteristic of the Christian friend; he stays no matter what misfortunes befall one. But surely that sort of friendship is, most of all, the mark of Christ. He is the Great Friend who came to men in poverty and disease and affliction and in all the ugliness of life "to preach good news to the poor . . . , to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4: 18 f.). It was Jesus who said, "No longer do I call you servants . . . ; but I have called you friends" (John 15: 15).

Another example may be chosen at random. According to 10: 7, "The memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot." The appearances often seem to indicate that righteousness is of little worth. Men frequently ask why the righteous should endure, why they should give full measure and honest workmanship when no one else seems concerned about it. Proverbs insists that when the accounts are properly balanced righteousness has its value. The day will come when the wicked have no power or wealth to influence people and when people will give thanks for the lives of the righteous. John Paterson aptly phrased the thought when he wrote, "Nero may sit in his chariot as it clatters up the Capitol hill at Rome with a train of captives behind, and Paul may languish in a Roman jail, but the day does come when men are willing to call their children Paul and their dogs Nero."<sup>4</sup> The names of Pilate and Caiaphas have been in bad odour for 1900 years, but "how sweet the name of Jesus sounds!" In the maxim the word "blessing" translates the Hebrew *berākā*, a term which refers to the capacity or power to achieve success, to attain one's full stature and proper goal in life. The righteous are not only remembered with joy; their memory gives courage and strength to succeeding generations. The power to achieve the measure of justice and freedom experienced in modern democratic society is, in large part, the gift of many past generations who, by their patient

3. The rendering in *The Bible, An American Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935).

4. *The Goody Fellowship of the Prophets* (New York: Scribners, 1948), p. 136.

conduct, inculcated high standards of righteousness and built the structure of free society. For many individuals, a hallowed memory is the inspiration which enables the person to persevere and obtain success in life. But, in a special way, the memory of Jesus is a blessing which gives the Christian the power to live abundantly.

A third example may be taken from 16: 2, "All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit." People are familiar with psychological attempts to discover the subconscious springs of conduct and with the tendency to excuse all misbehaviour as the effect of a mental illness or of environmental influences, rather than the action of a responsible person. Man has many ways of justifying himself. But it is God who really lays bare the inner self of a man. He probes far deeper into man's being than man himself. He knows what man's spirit or motives really are, and He also knows the cure for the deepest ailments of the human soul.

These examples show how the implications of the various sayings may be discovered by studying each separately. But it may now be asked whether there are any general principles to guide the preacher in his use of Proverbs. Such guiding principles are suggested by the introduction (1: 2-6) and the motto (1: 7) which the biblical editors added when they assembled the collections of individual sayings into the present book. They represent their understanding of the general purpose and the theological basis of the proverbs.

The introduction indicates a threefold purpose. It is set forth first in general terms (vs. 2) and then defined more fully stage by stage (vss. 3, 4, 6; vs. 5 is an interjection appended to vs. 4). The first purpose mentioned is the provision of discipline in wise conduct, and this is defined as including righteousness, justice and equity. Righteousness meant conduct in accord with recognized social and moral standards. The righteous man was in the right in his life. In a law suit he was the party acquitted by the court. Justice also had to do with social conduct. It referred to the way in which a community lived and to the treatment of its members by one another. Justice, for the Hebrew, was not pure impartiality in a legal process; it involved helping the poor and those less fortunate. Equity involved fairness and integrity in conduct. Training in these matters was effected by a process of discipline; the person who made an error, or was in danger of making an error, was corrected. Life imposes a rude discipline on men; "folly is the chastisement of fools" (16:22). Men are lazy, and they suffer want; when they are diligent they enjoy prosperity. Men become angry, and come to blows; when they speak softly they enjoy peace. Men scheme to get wealth by unjust means, and it slips away from their hands; when they earn their living they enjoy it. This discipline is described as the work of God. The wise man accepts the chastisement of God (3:11), but the fool only flies into a rage (19:3). The discipline or correction that others experience, the example of their lives and the funded experience of society may be lessons for the attentive man. Proverbs gathers up what many men have observed

and learned from the discipline of life for the guidance of others, to inculcate in them habits of righteousness, justice and equity.

The second purpose set forth in the introduction deals with the nurture of shrewdness in the simple or of knowledge and discretion in the young. The young are represented as simple, naive and gullible, ready to receive any idea that might come because they have no basis of judgment. Wisdom provided the shrewdness and discretion which were needed in order to live successfully. Shrewdness enabled a man to evaluate the motives of others and to analyze the situations in which he found himself. So Jesus told his disciples to be as cunning or shrewd as serpents, wise in the ways of the world. Discretion implies the ability to formulate plans and carry them through to completion. Wisdom, thus, equipped the youth thoroughly for the practical business of living. The parenthetical statement in vs. 5 reminds the educated adult that even he may benefit from the study of Proverbs and acquire "steersmanship." There is a great difference between book-learning and practical living, and apparently even Israel had its sages who lived in the clouds.

The third purpose of Proverbs has to do with the formal teachings of the wise men. It contains the sayings which set forth their insights into life, and it was intended to teach men to understand or discern the significance of their figures and their "riddles."

The threefold purpose of Proverbs might be summed up in the words conduct, wisdom, and knowledge. It was meant to enable a man to live socially, successfully, and sagely. It was not a book of theology but a book of morality, not a rule of faith but a rule of conduct. As such it deals with an important aspect of the Christian life which we cannot overlook. The influence of Proverbs may be seen in many of the teachings of Jesus. Paul, who always ended his letters with a section on the necessity and nature of Christian conduct, was not above quoting from Proverbs to underline his ideas.<sup>5</sup> It is primarily as a source book for Christian ethics that Proverbs has a significant place in the canon.

Yet the biblical editors did not think that these precepts could be divorced from theology. The motto they set down as the theme of the book was, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (1:7). This is the obverse and the reverse of a single truth. On the one side, there is the religious man who fears Yahweh and acquires wisdom; on the other, there is the fool. There are a number of words for fool in Proverbs; *'wil* is used here, indicating a dense, stupid sort of fellow, immoral and licentious, who learns nothing from experience and on whom all blows are wasted.<sup>6</sup> Thus, faith and wisdom with its practical observations on life belong together, and it is faith which provides the real basis for understanding Proverbs.

Indeed, for Proverbs, there is no true knowledge apart from God. The book does mention a type of human wisdom which is man's own conceit; it writes, "Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from

5. Cf. the quotation of 25:21 f. in Romans 12:20.

6. Cf. 27:22.

evil" (3:7; cf. 21:30). But this human intelligence was not a neutral sort of knowledge about the world or about man. It was only the wicked who thought that they could neglect God and live according to their own plans, who forgot that, though "a man's mind plans his way, . . . the Lord directs his steps" (16:9). Such knowledge is associated with wicked plans and immoral, anti-social men. The idea that intelligent men might attempt to build theories of society and social conduct on purely materialistic or humanistic science would have utterly puzzled the sages of Proverbs. The fool, interested in the success of his wicked schemes, might say, "There is no God," but the wisdom which builds up society was regarded as his gift.

Thus, for Proverbs, only the person who reverences God can gain a true education. This implies that all true science and all true morality, as well as all true religion, must start with the recognition of God. The divine Wisdom accompanied God in his work of creation and formed the pattern of the created world (8:22-31). As for man's moral nature, "The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all his innermost parts" (20:27). His social obligations to others stem ultimately from the fact that God has made him. The basis for moral conduct and for one's treatment of other people is not social compact or psychological investigations, but reverence for God. Proverbs would not share the uncritical faith sometimes placed in unguided scientific research in more recent times. Nazi scientists "proved" that Aryans are a superior race; other psychologists claim all races have the same inherent ability. But if, to-morrow, it should be proved that all classes and races were not equal, that would not justify a change in human conduct. The basis for social conduct is not simply scientific facts, but moral compulsions and religious faith. So Proverbs says, "He who mocks the poor insults his Maker" (17:5). The New Testament would add that he denies Christ who came to redeem not only him but all men. Faith must provide the basis for race relationships and other matters of morality and set science in its true perspective.

Faith and reason, therefore, are not antagonistic in Proverbs. Faith or knowledge of God comes first, and then man's reason, humble in the knowledge of God, can understand the lessons of life and appropriate truth to itself. Indeed, man can then by reason grow in his understanding of God. A circular response is established; faith provides the basis for true wisdom, but then wisdom adds to faith. This being so, "if you cry out for insight . . . , then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God" (2:3, 5). In other words, it is not merely a matter of revelation, but of discovery. The more man applies himself to wisdom, the more he learns of God, "for the Lord gives wisdom" (2:6).

It is against this background that the recurring appeals to experience must be understood. Wisdom is represented as crying out to men on the highways, at the gates of the city, in the doorways (8:1 ff.). In other words, in the places where men congregate, in the markets where they do their business, and on the roads they travel, in all their experiences Wisdom pleads with them to follow her way. They may learn if they will only attend

to her cry. An indolent man is directed, "Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise" (6:6). The teacher can relate how he looked out of his window and saw a naive youth passing through the street, describe how he was enticed by a harlot, and point out the lesson the episode held as a warning to other youths (7:6 ff.). In another passage the teacher tells how he passed by the vineyard of the sluggard with its broken wall and its nettles crowding out the vines, and from it drew a lesson: "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man" (24:30-34). Everywhere men turn Wisdom is almost shouting at them, if they will only open their eyes and use their ears.

But can men attain wisdom so easily? Proverbs is not entirely blind to this problem. The fools and the wicked were not unknown to the sages, and sometimes they were incorrigible. "Crush a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, yet his folly will not depart from him" (27:22). "It is like sport to a fool to do wrong" (10:23). The hands of the sluggard "refuse to labour" (21:25).

The only solution suggested in Proverbs is to start with the very young and provide them with the proper discipline. "Folly is bound up in the heart of the child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him" (22:15). By receiving the proper nurture the simple and the naive may be given knowledge. By and large, however, there are two classes of men, and experience has a cumulative effect upon them. The one continues to grow in folly, the other in wisdom, and the longer the process continues the more set they become in their respective ways. First, "he who heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof goes astray" (10:17). Then, "a scoffer seeks wisdom in vain, but knowledge is easy for a man of understanding" (14:6). Wisdom is like a woman whose every act improves her house, but folly progressively turns hers into a ruin (14:1). Experience has a cumulative effect. Judgment is not something far off, but a progressive factor in life. Every act is a further step in the process of building up or tearing down the structure of a man's life.

The preacher must recognize that Proverbs does not give the final word. One of the great differences between Proverbs and the Gospels is that the former has no real concept of redemption, and so little expectation of conversion. The sages have no way of dealing with the man who persists in folly and will not see God. The fool who makes a sport of doing wrong remains a problem on their hands. Proverbs insists that each man is responsible for his own life as the Christian also must do, but the Christian is aware of a redemptive power which can deliver men from predicaments they are powerless to overcome alone. In Proverbs Wisdom is pictured saying of those who refuse to heed, "I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you" (1:26). But Jesus said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matt. 23:37).