

APPENDIX: A PARENT'S GUIDE TO READING PROVERBS

1. Why such a big deal about Proverbs? Two reasons:
 - a. Proverbs provides us with the most direct instruction on raising kids in the Scriptures.
 - b. No other section of Scripture is more misunderstood in Christian parenting today than Proverbs.

The problem is that the ways that Proverbs are used in many parenting books today do not let them operate in the way God intended. We often take them out of context for our own purposes, perpetuating wrong ideas about God, our children, and the gospel.
2. Introduction to Wisdom Literature in the Bible
 - a. Key idea to Biblical Wisdom: **ORDER** (moral, physical)¹
 - i. We can see this in the structure of the created universe – God instilled order within the physical creation that forms the context in which we know Him in this life. Examples are the law of gravity (physical) and consequences for our actions (moral).
 - ii. Order is connected with harmony & beauty within God the Creator. When God *spoke* the world into being, the creation took on harmonic features of the Creator, especially in man and woman. Thus, this kind of wisdom/order is always tied with the living *word* of God. Wisdom is skillful living that is in accord with God's design.
 - b. Wisdom is supremely found in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:17-31; Col. 2:3; James 1:5; 3:13, 15, 17). To gain wisdom, we must be in relationship with Him, for He epitomizes God's design for creation.
 - c. The wise person is like Christ in every way. The moral symmetry that we find in Him becomes apparent in his children/students.
 - d. Relationship of Wisdom to Storyline of the Bible
 - i. Wisdom is a servant to the Covenant of Law that God made with Moses, which was designed to show our need for grace. The Law was never meant to make righteous, it was meant to provoke the need for grace and faith (Galatians 3:15-25). Wisdom literature performs a similar function to that of Paul's lists of the fruit of the Spirit (e.g., Gal. 5:22ff). Their purpose is to describe what a life should be progressively looking like for those who are in relationship with God by faith.
 - ii. Wisdom supplements the understanding of the Covenant between Creator and creature by defining the relationship as one where order is lost and needing to be restored/redeemed to creation.
 1. Creation: order brought into being out of chaos
 2. Fall: order lost; chaos released
 3. Redemption: order restored in Christ; chaos defeated forever
 - iii. Wisdom books form one unit in the canon of Scripture
 1. Proverbs: Perception of Order
 - a. Order is easily perceived by all
 - b. Wisdom is skillfully participating in God's order/design
 2. Job: Hiddenness of Order
 - a. Order is at times hidden from us, difficult to perceive
 - b. We must rely on faith in the author of Order even when we cannot see His design.
 3. Ecclesiastes: Confusion of Order

¹ Much of this is adapted from Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Wisdom*.

- a. Due to sin, order is at times hopelessly confused, impossible to perceive
 - b. We must rely on faith in God who will restore order to fallen creation one day.
- 3. Introduction to Proverbs
 - a. For literary, historical and theological introduction, please refer to Tremper Longman's commentary recently published through Baker.
 - b. Proverbs displays the created moral order that God instilled in creation by highlighting that, as a general rule, certain behaviors beget certain outcomes. In other words, if you do "A," then "B" will result. For example, Proverbs 29:17 says "Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul." Generally speaking, if we will discipline our children faithfully, then they will be blessings to us and not curses.
 - c. However, we get into trouble when we take this principle too far. It is not a promise we can bank on in all situations. Longman writes, "It is not the intention of a proverb to yield guarantees or promises but rather to point toward behaviors that, all things being equal, will normally lead to desired ends."²
 - d. Reading Proverbs in conjunction with Job and Ecclesiastes will help give us a more rounded picture, for "they function in part as a canonical corrective to an overreading of the book of Proverbs. They quash any presumption that one invariably and immediately receives rewards for good behavior and punishment for bad behavior."³
- 4. Implications for Parents
 - a. Though the book of Proverbs offers us a vast wealth of wisdom teachings in helping us to parent, we must not treat them as promises that hold true in every situation. It takes wisdom to apply proverbs, for they "are true only if stated at the right time and in the right circumstance."⁴ Reading Proverbs in conjunction with Job and Ecclesiastes, we must always be aware that no matter how hard we try to instill in them our beliefs and values, they are still free characters in God's Story and may not choose to follow Christ. The chances of their following Christ are much greater with such instruction and discipline, but there is never any guarantee.
 - b. Discipline and instruction do not bring life to our children. Only Christ can do that. Discipline and instruction provide ample opportunity for the "fear of the Lord" to be developed as our children relate to God. But it must be done in loving relationship; otherwise our children will only know Law from God, and not grace.
 - c. Let's talk about an example of a proper way to use a Proverb and an improper way. Let's assume your child (let's call him Jimmy) has lied about something, and you are wanting to teach him Proverbs 12:22: *The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful* (NIV). After quoting this verse, there are at least two possible ways to proceed:
 - i. A not-so-great way: "Jimmy, listen to what God's Word says. If you want the Lord to delight in you, then you must be truthful."
 - ii. Better way: "Jimmy, God is the Father of truth, and if we are going to follow Him we must also tell the truth. But you and I can't tell the truth without His grace changing our hearts, Jimmy. You need to ask God for a new, truth-telling heart. Do you want to do that now?"
 - iii. What is the difference between these two approaches? What does each assume?

² Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs*, 61.

³ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.