

Sermon: Proverbs 19

Silvia Purdie

Hand out various translations of Proverbs 19, including The Message.

Get into pairs/3s: Choose a proverb that speaks to you this morning. Compare different translations. Paraphrase it in your own words. How is this relevant to us today? (then pick another one)

How do we make sense of this section of scripture?

I don't know about you but I get quickly overwhelmed by the jumping around from topic to topic. It brings out my organisational side - I feel like taking some scissors to the page and making neat piles, sorting the proverbs into their various topics.

Actually, let's do that – not with the scissors, but let's think about what the different topics covered in this chapter.

What subject headings might our piles have?

...

Wealth and poverty ... honesty and falsehood ... effort, laziness ... family relationships ... wisdom, and how to become more sensible ... what doesn't fit? ... the one about the King's anger

Are the proverbs placed pretty much randomly, or can you discern some links between them? ... the one about the nagging wife is followed by one about an understanding wife.

I'll come back to all this, and your discussion, in a bit. First, though, let's talk about where all these proverbs come from. What do you already know about who wrote the book of Proverbs?

Actually that's an unfair question, because it seems that different parts of the book were written by different people at different times. And I'm not going to go into detail about who wrote what. The point is that the book as we have it today is a collection of writings, which in themselves are collections of wise sayings – so it's a collection of collections.

And some of these came later, but the oldest sections, including chapter 19, really do date back to King Solomon. Which makes them nearly 3,000 years old. Isn't that amazing! It still astonishes me that we can come to a document that is SO old and expect it to have any relevance to us at all. But we do, because we, as have countless millions of people down through the millennia, believe that God inspired these writings, and can inspire us, here and now, through these very same words.

So let's go back to your conversations earlier – which of these proverbs catch your eye, which of them speak to you in some way?

...

I like to picture King Solomon, surrounded by the finery of his palace, with precious gifts brought from every country, the finest jewels, gold, delicacies. With all his power and luxury, why did he bother with these proverbs, which are mostly about mundane ordinary things? What did he care about poor people and nagging wives? – I mean, if he got irritated with a wife he just got another one! And yet something about these little wise pithy sayings obviously intrigued him, and he fostered the telling of them and the writing down of them in his court. Every culture has folk sayings, and every civilization has written them down in some form. Many of the proverbs in this book probably started life as a little saying, an off-the-cuff remark, something you'd hear in the kitchen or marketplace anywhere.

Take number 19 for example – the one with a hot temper will pay the penalty! The first line of this is something I can easily imagine my Mum saying to me when I got cross with my sister.

I can also imagine King Solomon asking his court advisors to keep their ears open for stuff like this. I can picture them sitting around after the official business of the day and Solomon asking 'Right guys, what little gems do you have for me today?' Then from that raw material, the stuff of daily life, they formed the proverb by adding a second line.

This is where these proverbs really get interesting ... one line is stating the obvious. "If you get angry and violent there'll be trouble". I say that to my boys frequently. It's true, but in itself it is not wisdom. It becomes wisdom when we balance that straight-forward idea with another complementary idea ... in this case it's a shift in perspective from the angry man to the helping friend – and a warning that we may try to rescue people from the sticky situations they get into but we may end up having to do it over and over and over again. Suddenly it's actually a whole lot more complex than it looks at first glance.

This, folks, is wisdom. It's the tension between the first line and the 2nd line that invites us to think and think hard. And this teaches us to think, teaches us to test out ideas, think about how they apply to different situations. So the book of Proverbs is both a set of teachings ABOUT wisdom and at the same time it is a tool for teaching us HOW to become wise.

There are three vital things that Solomon and his court advisors 3000 years would want, I believe, to teach us about wisdom.

The first is that wisdom is **being open to learn**. Several of the proverbs in Chapter 19 teach this quite directly

20 'listen to advice, accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom for the future.'

And 27 – don't stray from the words of knowledge, hear instruction.

And there are many, many more scattered throughout the book.

The big idea here is that an essential foundation for a godly life is the desire to learn. Be open. Be curious. Be teachable.

We might also say that the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus, stirs in us and leads us on into more understanding. God himself is at work in that desire to know more – not just about God and the Bible, but about the world around us, the workings of our minds and bodies, the dynamics of growing children and marriage, the politics of global conflict, the effects and causes of climate change. The Christian world-view claims that because God made the entire universe, and because God intends to redeem the entire universe, there is nothing, no topic for study, that is beyond God.

So, friends, I challenge you to not be content with what you already know. Seek out new information, explore new questions. Seek wisdom.

The second teaching about wisdom stands in tension with the first; although God is universal, God is also quite specific. Our **God has particular values**, particular characteristics, which are not always our own. God's truth will always critique human understanding and human culture. And each proverb gives us a small glimpse into the heart of God, one little facet of God's truth. And so, we discover that this God, our God, Jesus' Father, cares about the poor and longs for justice. He cares about good family relationships and stands against all that would destroy love and respect. God cares about honesty, loyalty, generosity, patience.

God is like the King who gets angry, 'like the growling of a lion', but who's favour and grace fall gently like dew on the morning grass. (12)

So, for us, this teaching means that not everything we might think or do is in line with God. This challenges us to actively seek him, and to keep reflecting on what matters to us. This leads us into confession, as we know that we keep on going down paths of folly, we keep on missing the way – despite our best intentions we tend towards ways of destruction. We need to hear the growling of the lion, God's warning. Reject foolishness and choose wisdom.

Thirdly, the proverbs are **practical**. They're not just ideas, they are teachings for real life. We grow in wisdom as we APPLY wisdom to our speech, our choices, our actions. As number 16 says, those who KEEP the commandments and will live! It's no good just knowing them in theory – life is about the nitty gritty, our habits and routines, what we spend money on, how we show love to other people, what we do with our anger.

I invite you now to read through the proverbs again, and ask God to point out one area of your life that you do differently.

One that particularly speaks to me is number 21.

We humans keep brainstorming options and plans, but God's purpose prevails.

I like brainstorming options and making plans ... and I hear that 'BUT'. Yes, God says to me, go ahead, try out ideas, seek other people's opinions, look for ways to grow the church and reach out to people, make plans for special times together as a family ... BUT, says God, I'm in charge, not you! Trust me. Follow my lead. Seek my purposes. Don't strain, don't rush, go gently.

So, we've gone on a journey this morning into a unique ancient writing, the book of Proverbs. We've cast our minds back 3000 years into a royal court, with a king and his advisors who themselves worshiped and followed the same God we do. Their love for God lead them to seek practical wisdom, God's truth in real life, and out of their listening and discussing they wrote these proverbs, which in both their content and their form teach wisdom. They challenge us to seek to learn more about God and the world around us. They challenge us to seek the distinctive values of God, which condemn foolishness and evil. They challenge us to live out these values in our everyday lives, and in our life together as a church.

You've worked hard this morning - Thank you for joining in the conversation. I hope you'll read more of the book of Proverbs over the next week or two. I invite you to copy out some that stand out for you, to think about how the second line balances or critiques the first, and what it might mean in your life.

Anyway, enough teaching, let us pray.

Various other 'proverbs':

The two most common elements in the universe are hydrogen and stupidity.
But not in that order.

Brian Pickrell

Nature gave us one tongue and two ears
so we could hear twice as much as we speak.

Epictetus

A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.

William James

The less we know, the longer the explanation.

B.G.

Opinions are like feet. Everybody's got a couple, and they usually stink.

Jim Slattery

Life is like a roll of toilet paper; hopefully long and useful, but it always ends at the wrong moment.

Rudyh

Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way, when you criticize them, you're a mile away and you have their shoes.

The secret of life is honesty and fair dealing ..
if you can fake that, you've got it made.

– *Groucho Marx*

Proverbs worship

July 2010

Call to worship

Opening choruses: *Alleluia, alleluia* (blue 276)
 Father, I thank you (blue 269)

Prayer of praise and confession

Notices, news

Hymn: *Lord of creation* (WOV 557)

Reading: Proverbs 19, 'The Message' translation
+ everyone read in pew Bibles and handouts

Discussion in pairs:
Choose a proverb that speaks to you this morning. Compare different translations.
Paraphrase it in your own words. How is this relevant to us today?
(then pick another one)

Sermon/ teaching on Proverbs

(Song: - Optional *Kneels at the feet of his friends* (WOV 561)

Prayers for others

Offering +
Song (leading into Communion) *He has brought us this far by his grace* (blue 244)

Holy Communion

Final hymn *May the mind of Christ* (WOV 537)

Blessing