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Chapter 1

Reading the Proverbs Wisely

The Emphasis on Teachability

The author of the Book of Proverbs is concerned both with imparting information and in creating a teachable spirit in the reader. Proverbs 1:2-7 lays out the primary goals of the entire composition:

*To know wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight,
to receive instruction in wise dealing,
in righteousness, justice, and equity;
to give prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the youth.*

(vv. 2-4)

In this section, the writer directly states that the subsequent proverbs were compiled so that the reader might acquire knowledge, wisdom, instruction, and words of insight. Yet, padding the reader's intellect is not the primary emphasis of the book. According to the preface, wisdom is demonstrated by applying the proverbs to one's life in order to make decisions that reflect God's standards of righteousness, justice, and equity. In this sense, Proverbs strives to teach people—especially youth—to be wise in practical life matters.

Gaining knowledge and applying knowledge are fundamental concepts that continuously reappear throughout Proverbs. The way these ideas come up again and again helps us perceive their significance, and so we recognize that just knowing the Proverbs does not make a person wise. We experience wisdom only when we correctly apply the proverbs to our daily lives.

The book has further expectations. If we read too quickly, we might miss the subtle change in direction between 1:4 and 5, where the author shifts from what the *proverbs* might provide us to how *we* should approach and learn from the proverbs. The impartation of knowledge, and even instruction with regard to how to practically apply it, are not *all* that the author presents.

The Wise Hear with Their “Eyes”?

My wife, Gaby, and I are the parents of two young children, a boy and a girl who are separated in age by five years. When our son was about three years old, we introduced him to riding a bike. Naturally, we defaulted to teaching him how to balance himself on a bike by using training wheels. We thought this method had been effective for generations by eliminating the need to perfectly balance oneself on the thin tread of two tires. Minimizing the balance issue makes it easier for beginners to pedal, attempt to steer, and refrain from falling, all at the same time.

For us, however, this method did not work. Our curious son was often more interested in observing the scenery around him than he was on pedaling or bracing himself with his feet. Once the training wheels came off, these “distracted driving” habits would lead to him losing his balance. This led to countless “detours” off his path that resulted in us running toward an upended bicycle and a child who was unsure he wanted to attempt riding again without full body armor.

About five years later, we went about teaching our daughter to ride a bike in a different manner. This time, we purchased a balance bike. The “balance-bike method” of training differs from the “training-wheel method” in that there are no pedals involved at all. Children are encouraged to push off of the ground, lift their feet, look ahead, and steer with their hands. This method permits learners to see what is in front of them and focus on their path, while keeping their balance without thinking about their feet. Whereas the training-wheel method develops the instinct of children to brace themselves if they are about to fall, balance-bike training banks on children avoiding danger by way of them seeing their path and learning to steer clear with their arms.

At first take, it seems counterintuitive to teach children how to ride a bike by focusing on their arms. Likewise, it appears counterintuitive to call readers of Proverbs to grow in wisdom by hearing with their eyes; but that is what the introduction of Proverbs teaches. Just after the author states the initial goals of Proverbs in 1:2-4, the attention of the reader is turned toward how to devote oneself to achieving them. In verses 5-6, we read:

*Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance,
to understand a proverb and a saying,
the words of the wise and their riddles.*

Let’s make a few observations relating to these verses in their context at the beginning of the book and examine what they might be saying to both ancient and contemporary readers of Proverbs.

“Hearing” is one of the primary ways in which learning correct information is described in Proverbs (see 8:33-34; 15:31; 22:17). Through reading the proverbs, we “hear” proper instruction that brings about obedience to and application of those proverbs in any given situation. Hearing

with one's eyes is similar to riding a bicycle with one's arms. It is hearing—that is, being attentive to and learning proper knowledge—that directs the reader on his or her path. If we do not hear instruction with our eyes and respond properly, we are prone to guiding ourselves into difficult situations or even to crashing.

The second apparently counterintuitive remark by the author in this text is quite subtle. Notice what the author calls the person who is invited to “hear.” The person who is willing to hear (with the eyes) is already called “wise” (1:5). It seems contrary to common sense that the writer would be calling a wise person to gain more wisdom through being willing to hear instruction. Isn't the wise person wise because he or she has already paid attention to the instruction?

What the author seems to be getting at is the following: There is a disposition of being willing to listen to wisdom and heed instruction. The hearer (that is, the reader) who approaches the text with this disposition is already considered, in some measure, to be wise (see 17:24). This is the type of reader who will make the most of interacting with and being challenged by Proverbs (see 9:9). The author of Proverbs was not only striving to communicate information to the readers but also trying to instill the value of reading well—that is, reading Proverbs wisely.

In order to read Proverbs wisely, the reader must first approach the book in the posture of one who is fully dedicated to hearing—that is, receiving and obeying instruction. It is not until one's disposition is in the correct state that the knowledge taught through the proverbs can be properly applied in one's personal pathway. A reader who comes to the main contents of the book without checking her or his posture toward instruction and correction is not a good hearer—that is, not an ideal reader (commonly likened to a fool in Proverbs)—and will not grow in wisdom. These are timeless truths of Proverbs that the author provides simply in the introduction.

In Proverbs, the wise hear with their eyes. The eyes guide the readers on their pathway to increasingly attaining more wisdom, which is one of the wise reader's ultimate goals in life. If you close your eyes, you close your ears and refuse to listen to the wisdom that the writer intends to impart. Closing one's ears is actually what is repeatedly presented as counterintuitive throughout Proverbs. If you do not hear instruction, you cannot see where you are going.

So, what is required by the author at the beginning of the composition in order for the book to have the greatest practical impact upon the reader? Teachability.

The “Precioso Tesoro” of Teachability

“La juventud es un precioso tesoro / Youth is a precious treasure.”

My “Grandma Guillermina” was one of the most comical people I ever met; whether her humor was intentional, straight-faced wit, or an unintentional by-product of intergenerational communication is something that I will never know. All the same, my grandmother would never know how profoundly she impacted my life, considering the small amount of time we were able to spend together.

Growing up, I did not have the opportunity to get to know my paternal grandmother well. This was primarily because I lived in the United States during my youth, while my grandparents were in Puerto Rico. I relocated to Puerto Rico during my college years with aspirations of building a relationship with them. This was not to be; just prior to my move, my grandfather Manuel passed away and my grandmother moved to New York City to be cared for by my aunt. Grandma Guillermina would spend the rest of her days on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Toward the end of her life, my grandmother developed dementia. By this time, I had returned to the United States,

was married, and lived in the Philadelphia area. During this stage of life, I wanted to spend as much time with my grandmother as possible—I imagine that I was trying to make up for lost time, if such a thing were possible. To that end, Gaby and I made the trek to New York City as often as we could.

My grandmother passed away in 2006. I still have vivid memories of her final days that are nothing less than wonderful. I especially remember the things that she used to say. I remember the wisdom with which she tried to leave her grandchildren, and I even remember the intonation of her voice when she would speak her wisdom to us. I attribute these memories to how frequently my grandmother would repeat the same wise phrases. One of her favorite sayings was an encouragement to those younger than her to take advantage of their youth. Every few minutes during any family gathering, my grandmother would turn to one of her grandchildren and say, “*La juventud es un precioso tesoro,*” or, “Youth is a precious treasure.” My grandmother was determined to encourage young people to recognize the blessing of still looking forward to most of their years.

Nowadays, every time there is a family gathering, someone without fail mentions Grandma Guillermina’s motto about youth. Her sayings are now repeated word for word, accompanied by her intonation, facial expression, and our heartfelt recollections of the final stage of her life. Even though Grandma Guillermina is no longer physically with us, her final messages to her grandchildren endure. Now that I am much older and have children of my own, I understand, more than ever, my grandmother’s repeated words of wisdom in urging me to make the best of the earlier periods in life.

Some might attribute my grandmother’s repetition of the same phrases to dementia. I attribute this phenomenon to God. Repetition was how I was able to attain and retain the wisdom that my grandmother was striving to impart.

Proverbs uses repetition as a way of leaving a lasting impact upon the reader. The repetition we observe in Proverbs begins at the most fundamental rhetorical level in the simple recurrence of words and phrases throughout the book that serve as building blocks for communicating about key concepts (such as wisdom, knowledge, instruction). This repetition is even more vivid in cases where specific literary devices like metaphors and imagery reappear in order to drive home the main teachings of the composition (for example, the “fountain of life” in 10:11; 13:14; 14:27; 16:22). In some cases, entire proverbs are even repeated (for example, 20:16; 27:13). Regardless of how this incorporation of similar and/or identical proverbs into the final composition actually came to pass historically, one thing is important when looking at repetition in Proverbs as a whole: repetition helps us know what was most important to the author.

The teachable posture of the reader is another repeatedly touched-on topic throughout the book and emerges as one of the most significant themes—a corner puzzle piece, you could say. Proverbs urges all to be teachable as they approach the text, and the book perpetually calls the reader back to that posture throughout the reading process. Let’s examine this principle of teachability.

The Irony of Reading Proverbs

The fact that Proverbs focuses so much on teachability turns out to be a bit ironic in terms of how the book is read. On the one hand, Proverbs can be a comfortable and effortless read. The majority of the proverbs are easy-to-understand sayings that give practical instructions to apply to our lives. Thus, a casual reading of the book could leave the reader feeling naïvely optimistic that everything in life will just sort of work out, especially if you are a nice person and try your hardest to live a good life. On the other hand, the constant

appeal for the reader to be teachable makes Proverbs the most challenging biblical book and the most complicated to relate to our day and age. How is it possible to say that reading Proverbs can be easy and complicated, effortless and challenging, all in the same breath?

The answer to these questions has everything to do with how, and by whom, Proverbs is read. If Proverbs is read by a person who desires to walk with the Lord, is willing to listen, understands the limitations of his or her own knowledge, and journeys with other wise people, then applying the proverbs to one's pathway, ironically, might be *challenging*. The reason for this is simple: persons who are on the pathway to wisdom earnestly receive the injunctions of Proverbs and strive to grow in wisdom by adhering to the instructions therein. Heeding instruction inevitably leads to transformation, because those who are teachable honestly consider how their personal pathways reflect the fear of the Lord in their individual circumstances.

On the other hand, someone who is not teachable and lives according to his or her own human "wisdom" is considered a fool in Proverbs. Interestingly, Proverbs might be an *easy* read to this person. The reason for this is also simple: if the reader is not willing to be open, be honest, receive instruction, and seek to be mentored by wise people, then that person will see no imperative to respond to the wisdom presented in Proverbs. This "easy reading" of Proverbs is ironic in that the proverbs might be easy to grasp, but the reader misses the fact that the book intends to guide people in practical life decisions on their pathways to wisdom. Recognizing that one needs guidance is considered to be wisdom in Proverbs.

So how is it possible to be teachable, according to the proverbs? For the answer, we look at the repetitions about teachability. Just like my grandmother's teaching about taking advantage of one's youth, the principle of teachability is reiterated in one way or another in the proverbs so often that

it is impossible to ignore. The proverbs commend the teachability of those who are willing to receive instruction from others, who recognize the limitations of their own knowledge, and who respect the wisdom of the wise. Those who are teachable correctly proceed in their pathway to wisdom.

This principle of teachability overlaps with other primary themes of Proverbs (for example, humility, relationship to parents) that we will discuss further in later chapters. Yet, prior to discussing what Proverbs says about other areas of life, we must consider the practical ways to approach the proverbs as teachable people, receptive to instruction throughout our reading. We have to assume the proper posture toward the proverbs prior to applying them to our pathways.

Receiving Instruction from Others

A popular adage attributed to the Greek philosopher Epictetus states that human beings have two ears and one mouth so that they can listen twice as much as they speak.

It sounds like Epictetus was an avid reader of Proverbs.

It is impossible to talk and listen at the same time. Remaining quiet with open ears is a posture that indicates humility and willingness to receive instruction. Therefore, it is not shocking to see that there are more proverbs about listening than there are about speaking. Being slow to speak not only represents a posture of humility but also recognizes that ignorant speech is unwise speech, and unwise speech can be harmful. People who love to listen to themselves run a high risk of making rash comments and then suffering the consequences of their indiscretion (11:12; 13:3). In order to avoid the shame that accompanies ignorant speech, it is prudent to listen and be informed concerning any given matter prior to speaking (18:13; see 15:28).

The proverbs' constant call to "listen" does not necessarily relate to one's capability of perceiving sounds with the ear.

Of course, hearing is an important part of listening; but this, alone, misses the point. Rather, the proverbs are talking about a person's ability to receive instruction. Being receptive to instruction has three parts: it incorporates learning information and implementing that knowledge in life decisions, it consists of receiving and obeying commandments, and it includes accepting and responding to correction. Those who are on their way to wisdom manifest their attentiveness to God-honoring instruction through their conduct in their personal circumstances.

Listening is active in Proverbs.

Proverbs calls upon the reader to *actively* seek out knowledge and advice: "An intelligent heart acquires knowledge, / and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge" (18:15; see also 13:10; 23:12). This determination is necessary in order to continue journeying on the pathway to wisdom in such a way that our life decisions reflect that we are walking with the Lord. Our willingness to pursue insight and obey the commands and instruction that come along as we journey is indicative of whether or not we are on the pathway to wisdom, whether or not we are on the path leading to life (10:8, 17; see also 6:23; 13:13).

Receiving instruction and direction is one thing; being corrected for wrongdoing is another. Despite the fact that seeking out knowledge and heeding commands takes effort, it is not the only, or the most difficult, challenge related to listening to instruction. A bigger challenge to our walk comes in the form of corrective or reprimanding instruction. It is safe to say that being corrected is generally not an enjoyable experience. Those on their way to wisdom accept correction, introspect, and apply the knowledge they have learned to their lives. Those who refuse correction do not receive wisdom and go to extremes to avoid counsel (15:12).

Proverbs pushes back against the tendency to reject correction by reiterating that those who willingly accept correction

the most, progress the most in their path to wisdom. This is a bit unexpected, because those who receive the most correction are apparently instructed as a result of deviating from the path. In Proverbs, the need for correction and instruction *does not* necessarily mean someone is a fool. Proverbs frequently reiterates that people who are open to criticism learn from their experiences and advance in their pathways (17:10; 19:25; 21:11). Listening to advice and accepting instruction in the present are an investment in gaining wisdom that pays dividends along the pathway in the future (19:20).

Limitations of Our Knowledge

It was only a two-mile drive from my high school to my house.

When I was sixteen years old, I attended a basketball game at my high school with a friend and another buddy. My buddy had agreed to drive my friend and me home, and so the three of us crammed into the front seat of his brand-new truck. There was nothing dainty about this vehicle. It was big, fast, and burgundy. Overwhelmed with my own sense of invincibility, I jumped into the passenger seat of what felt like a monster truck.

“Put on your seat belt,” I said to my passenger friend.

“I can’t find it. I don’t need it.” He responded, as he pulled his hand out from between the bench and the back part of the seat.

In most situations like this during my high school years, I would have dismissed my friend’s comment, raised my voice, and reiterated my command, expecting him to oblige. However, in this case, I conceded to his point about not needing the seat belt. A seat belt was a dispensable part of a two-mile, three-minute, monster-truck ride. We left the parking lot flying high as immortal teenagers, speeding toward my home. I had made this drive from my school to my home

hundreds of times during my high school years. To this day, I only remember one of those drives—this one.

Immediately upon leaving the parking lot, we found ourselves behind a compact car that was puttering along on the two-lane road. Unwilling to drive his impressive vehicle at such a slow pace, my buddy became impatient and tried to pass the car in the left lane facing oncoming traffic. The driver of the small vehicle refused to let us pass and, within a couple of seconds, we were stuck in an impromptu drag race. Less than a minute later, the compact car slowed down and our driver veered back into the proper lane suspecting that the smaller car had conceded to our victory. As he looked back at the car he had passed, my friend did not realize that he was approaching a busy intersection. Braking at this point would not help, as he plowed into the car in front of him, causing a chain reaction. I still remember the screeching of the immense tires, the smell of burned rubber, and the helpless fear I sensed as we initiated the multiple-car accident.

My friend did not think he needed his seat belt.

I did not think my friend needed the seat belt.

Years later, it is difficult to express how grateful I am that my friend did find and fasten his seat belt immediately after our human wisdom had concluded that he did not *need* it.

As we journey in our lives, sometimes we conclude that there are things that we do not *need* to take with us. Our car accident is a tangible example of how we might consider necessary items to be nonessentials on our journey. We tend to think that we can survive whatever might come across our path on our own. This mentality almost led me and my friend into one of the biggest mistakes of our lives. In Proverbs, having this cavalier attitude toward wisdom is one of the biggest mistakes anyone could make.

Proverbs presents wisdom as something that everyone needs. In a sense, wisdom is like a seat belt that restrains us from disaster. In Proverbs, the one who trusts only in his own

abilities is deceived into thinking that he can withstand any issue that might develop along his path. This self-sufficient person is set in contrast with the person who walks in wisdom: “Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, / but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered” (28:26). It is impossible to both be wise and rank one’s own insight higher than the pursuit of wisdom.

Those who overestimate their own inherent wisdom will never grasp an essential teaching of Proverbs—namely, that all people are in need of instruction. Our ability to make life decisions that demonstrate we are walking with the Lord is hindered by our desire to act independently. One of the main ways this concept is illustrated in Proverbs is by the repeated mention of people viewing their paths in a manner not reflective of reality. Being wise, or doing what is right, in one’s “own eyes” without considering true wisdom is comparable to being a fool:

*The way of a fool is right in his own eyes,
but a wise man listens to advice.*

(Proverbs 12:15)

*Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes?
There is more hope for a fool than for him.*

(Proverbs 26:12)

For the purpose of clarification, it is important to note that the proverbs do not unilaterally speak against humans using their faculties. Additionally, the proverbs do not suggest that the “fool” is unlearned. The “fool” could indeed be quite well educated in the sense of having acquired significant cognitive knowledge through studying. A fool is a person who misguidedly positions her or his own human competence above wisdom. This problematic inversion occurs when fools so appreciate their own capacities that receiving instruction of any kind, and learning from others in any way, is unneeded in their eyes. Naturally, this leads fools into a misguided

state in which they perceive themselves in a certain manner (normally in a positive light), when reality tells a different story (30:12-13; see also 21:2). Since fools already think they know everything, they stubbornly persist in their ways (23:9), even after hearing wisdom.

To the fool, there is no need for wisdom.

To us teenagers, there was no need for a seat belt.

How foolish!

We, by God's grace, were rescued from our folly and protected from ultimate disaster. There is no promise that this type of rescue is in store for those who perpetually ignore the wisdom of the Lord in favor of their own "wisdom." Exclusively using our own faculties is oftentimes devastating in our personal lives as we travel along our pathways: "There is a way that seems right to a man, / but its end is the way to death" (14:12; see also 21:16). Proverbs presents itself as that wise and needed guidance insofar as the reader is willing to receive it. In order to receive wisdom, we have to recognize we need it.

Walk with the Wise!

In contrast to scoffers who ignore reproof and fools who trust in their own faculties as they travel down their ill-fated paths, those who are receptive to instruction from others walking in wisdom are headed in the right direction: "Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, / but he who rejects reproof leads others astray" (10:17). As we walk on our pathways, we need to always listen to wisdom, being open to instruction and reproof from others on their pathways to wisdom. We cannot read and receive from Proverbs well unless we are willing to do this.

Despite the fact that our lives and, therefore, our pathways, are distinct, Proverbs depicts those who are walking in wisdom supporting one another through good counsel. In view of

this, Proverbs calls for those seeking wisdom to walk with the wise: “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, / but the companion of fools will suffer harm” (13:20). In some cases, walking with the wise implies living alongside people who are further along in their journeys and can provide practical wisdom and instruction about common life experiences.

For decades, our friends Carl and Barbara have invited people to journey alongside them as they walk in the wisdom of the Lord. They have been married for over half a century and have served in formal ministry during all of their years together. Carl and Barbara have had the opportunity to speak into the lives of countless people. This became particularly evident in the second half of their ministry together, in which Carl directed a church-based pastoral training school, and Barbara served in various capacities to support the families of the students who were training for ministry. A generation of pastors, church leaders, missionaries, and Christian educators went through the school of ministry during Carl’s tenure as director. Now, an incalculable amount of people around the world are directly and indirectly benefiting from the ministry of Carl and Barbara.

Their fifty-plus years of faithful public and parochial service are inspiring, but, ironically, this is not what makes Carl and Barbara extraordinary in ministry. What makes Carl and Barbara so special is that they have consistently invited different types of people into deeply personal fellowship with them. They do not make friends; they make family. Now approaching their eighties, Carl and Barbara still encourage people to come alongside them, observe them, share different opinions with them, and live life together.

Gaby and I met this couple in 2006 at the beginning of my theological training. Despite the fact that we were different in many ways (such as generational difference, certain cultural practices, preferred language), Carl and Barbara “adopted” us, accepted us “as is,” were intentional about sharing life with us,

and were undeterred by our very real differences. They have encouraged us, counseled us, corrected us, and instructed us, all at the right times. They have likewise demonstrated their teachability throughout the years by opening their house and—more importantly—their ears to us and others. By inviting people of different ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and political persuasions into their personal space, they have remained open to listening to different perspectives and have demonstrated their willingness to learn.

Everyone needs their own “Carl and Barbara.”

Proverbs repeatedly asserts the importance of those who are on their pathways to wisdom surrounding themselves with positive companionship as opposed to foolish influences. My wife, Gaby, and I have tried to do this, choosing the companionship of those who proved themselves to be walking in the way of wisdom. Time spent with fools is time wasted, because there is no knowledge to be gained from them (14:7). Conversely, in the presence of good companionship, competent counsel is exchanged, and friends strengthen one another on their respective pathways (see 15:22; 27:17). As we walk along our individual pathways, sometimes we need to be instructed and corrected—like the “son” of Proverbs. At other times, we are compelled to correct and provide instruction to our companions (28:23)—like the parents of Proverbs. This is how we walk in a community with others who are headed in the same direction.

Listening to this precious wisdom as we walk with the wise helps us prevent unnecessary problems (13:14). Just as the value of wisdom from wise mentors cannot be overstated, so the severity of the ramifications of turning away from the teaching of the wise cannot be overstated. We need to walk with wise people who can help us along in our pathways. We need to stay as close to them as possible for as long as we possibly can.

Pausing Prior to Proceeding

My personal aversion to puzzles does not prevent me from recognizing an unmistakable corner piece when I see one.

In Proverbs, teachability is a corner piece.

This principle is repeated endlessly in Proverbs. Identifying and laying down the corner piece of teachability permits us to proceed in identifying other major components of Proverbs and to improve our understanding of the book as a whole. Many of the puzzle pieces begin falling into place as we are better able to see the big picture.

More important, however, is the personal component to all of this. Now that we have observed that teachability is a prerequisite required by Proverbs to reading the proverbs well, understanding and applying the component parts of the book will start to fall into place. Now we can work toward fully grasping how the decision about the direction of our lives affects us on a daily basis. We are ready to proceed toward properly understanding and appropriately applying the advice of Proverbs' wisdom in our personal pathways.

We can now proceed; but not until we pause.

Our eyes have been opened to a posture concerning Proverbs that we cannot ignore. We cannot “unhear” that Proverbs compels us as readers to make a decision concerning whether or not we will receive instruction. Pausing, therefore, is the best way to proceed at this point. Now that our eyes have “heard” what Proverbs has to say concerning the posture of the reader, we are responsible for properly responding. We have to embrace the space and consciously move into the reading experience. We cannot simply reverse out of this space and deny that we heard the call of Proverbs unto teachability. Before proceeding we . . . must . . . pause.

It is a good idea to set this book down a minute for introspection. It is time to honestly ask if we are ready to learn from the wisdom of Proverbs. Either way, it is time for prayer—

prayer for God to provide us with a spirit of teachability to the point that we would gratefully accept challenges, correction, and instruction as we read through and respond to Proverbs.

We need guidance. We need to be teachable. We need to listen. We need to understand our own limits. We need to walk with the wise.



PROVERBS

PATHWAYS *to* WISDOM



DOMINICK S. HERNÁNDEZ

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