

Living Wisely in God's World

Studies in the Book of Proverbs

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6. Wisdom in Relationships

Living wisely in this world means living with other people. We have already seen that we are not in this on our own:

Plans are established by taking advice (Prov. 20:18).

in an abundance of counselors there is safety (Prov. 11:14).

It also means living in relationship with God:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Prov. 9:10).

Commit your work to the Lord,
and your plans will be established (Prov. 16:3).

This amounts to a spelling out of the two great commandments (Matt. 22:37–40). In this final session we look at relationships with friends, neighbours and family, marriage and sexual ethics, and our marriage with Christ.

Friends and Family

Friends and family are to be highly valued:

A friend loves at all times,
and kinsfolk are born to share adversity (Prov. 17:17).

Friends can be more significant, and sometimes more helpful, even, than family:

Some friends play at friendship
but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin (Prov. 18:24).

Do not forsake your friend or the friend of your parent;
do not go to the house of your kindred in the day of your calamity.
Better is a neighbor who is nearby
than kindred who are far away (Prov. 27:10).

There is such a thing as false friendship, for the wrong reason:

Wealth brings many friends,
but the poor are left friendless (Prov. 19:4).

Many seek the favor of the generous,
and everyone is a friend to a giver of gifts.
If the poor are hated even by their kin,
how much more are they shunned by their friends!

When they call after them, they are not there (Prov. 19:6, 7).

Friendship needs to be fostered in the context of God's forgiveness:

One who forgives an affront fosters friendship,
but one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend (Prov. 17:9).

Healthy friendship also requires straight talking, and a bit of give and take:

The righteous gives good advice to friends,
but the way of the wicked leads astray (Prov. 12:26).

Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts,
but profuse are the kisses of an enemy (Prov. 27:6).

Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor
than he who flatters with his tongue (Prov. 28:23).

Iron sharpens iron,
and one man sharpens another (Prov. 27:17).

We need to be able to receive advice as well as give it:

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,
but those who hate to be rebuked are stupid (Prov. 12:1).

We do need to be mindful of the power of the spoken word in the context of a close relationship:

The evil are ensnared by the transgression of their lips,
but the righteous escape from trouble.
From the fruit of the mouth one is filled with good things,
and manual labor has its reward.
Fools think their own way is right,
but the wise listen to advice.
Fools show their anger at once,
but the prudent ignore an insult.
Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence,
but a false witness speaks deceitfully.
Rash words are like sword thrusts,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.
Truthful lips endure forever,
but a lying tongue lasts only a moment (Prov. 12: 13–19).

We do need to choose our times, and there are times when it is better not to speak out at all:

Like vinegar on a wound
is one who sings songs to a heavy heart (Prov. 25:20).

Whoever belittles another lacks sense,
but an intelligent person remains silent.
A gossip goes about telling secrets,
but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence (Prov. 11:12–13).

There are some things it is better to stay right out of:

Like somebody who takes a passing dog by the ears
is one who meddles in the quarrel of another (Prov. 26:17).

Without care and attention, friendship can come to a sticky end:

A perverse person spreads strife,
and a whisperer separates close friends (Prov. 16:28; compare 26:20, 22).

An ally offended is stronger than a city;
such quarreling is like the bars of a castle (Prov. 18:19; compare Ps. 55:12–14; John 13:21–30).

With this in mind, we need to go into friendship with our eyes open:

Make no friends with those given to anger,
and do not associate with hotheads,
or you may learn their ways
and entangle yourself in a snare (Prov. 22:24–25).

Neighbours

Neighbours are to be treated with neighbourly respect—we need to be able to get along:

Do not plan harm against your neighbor
who lives trustingly beside you (Prov. 3:29).

We have seen that a good neighbour can be as significant as family:

Better is a neighbor who is nearby
than kindred who are far away (Prov. 27:10).

By the same token, we are not to live in each other's pockets, or overstay our welcome:

Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house,
otherwise the neighbor will become weary of you and hate you (Prov. 25:17).

Neighbourliness is not to be conditioned by wealth or status:

The poor are disliked even by their neighbors,
but the rich have many friends.
Those who despise their neighbors are sinners,
but happy are those who are kind to the poor (Prov. 14:20–21).

We need to think carefully before becoming litigious with our neighbours—it can do compounding damage:

Do not be a witness against your neighbor without cause,
and do not deceive with your lips (Prov. 24:28).

Like a war club, a sword, or a sharp arrow
is one who bears false witness against a neighbour (Prov. 25:18).

We need to recognise that there may be times when we are in the wrong, and would want our neighbours to give us a bit of leeway:

do not hastily bring into court;
for what will you do in the end,
when your neighbor puts you to shame?
Argue your case with your neighbor directly,
and do not disclose another's secret;
or else someone who hears you will bring shame upon you,

and your ill repute will have no end (Prov. 25:8–10; compare Matt. 5:25–26).

There are certain behaviours that should not be countenanced:

Like a maniac who shoots deadly firebrands and arrows,
so is one who deceives a neighbor
and says, "I am only joking!" (Prov. 26:18–19).

Whoever blesses a neighbor with a loud voice,
rising early in the morning,
will be counted as cursing (Prov. 27:14).

We need to be watchful against those who may be using the relationship to gain advantage for themselves at others' expense:

Whoever flatters a neighbor
is spreading a net for the neighbor's feet (Prov. 29:5).

The souls of the wicked desire evil;
their neighbors find no mercy in their eyes (Prov. 21:10).

But there is a way of not responding in kind:

If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat;
and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink;
for you will heap coals of fire on their heads,
and the LORD will reward you (Prov. 25:21–22; compare Rom. 12:20).

Marriage

Marriage comes highly commended in Proverbs. A good marriage is a gift from God:

He who finds a wife finds a good thing,
and obtains favor from the Lord (Prov. 18:22).

House and wealth are inherited from parents,
but a prudent wife is from the Lord (Prov. 19:4).

Just as a good marriage is a blessing, so a not so good marriage can bring great distress, because the relationship is so close, and goes so deep:

A good wife is the crown of her husband,
but she who brings shame is like rotteness in his bones (Prov. 12:4).

A continual dripping on a rainy day
and a contentious wife are alike;
to restrain her is to restrain the wind
or to grasp oil in the right hand (Prov. 27:15–16).

It is better to live in a corner of the housetop
than in a house shared with a contentious wife (Prov. 21:9; 25:24).

It is better to live in a desert land
than with a contentious and fretful wife (Prov. 21:19).

One of the prime benefits of wisdom and God's commandment is the keeping of young people for right marriage and from sexual immorality:

For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light,
and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life,
to preserve you from the wife of another,
from the smooth tongue of the adulteress.
Do not desire her beauty in your heart,
and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes;
for a prostitute's fee is only a loaf of bread,
but the wife of another stalks a man's very life.
Can fire be carried in the bosom
without burning one's clothes?
Or can one walk on hot coals
without scorching the feet?
So is he who sleeps with his neighbor's wife;
no one who touches her will go unpunished.
Thieves are not despised who steal only
to satisfy their appetite when they are hungry.
Yet if they are caught, they will pay sevenfold;
they will forfeit all the goods of their house.
But he who commits adultery has no sense;
he who does it destroys himself.
He will get wounds and dishonor,
and his disgrace will not be wiped away.
For jealousy arouses a husband's fury,
and he shows no restraint when he takes revenge.
He will accept no compensation,
and refuses a bribe no matter how great (Prov. 6:23–35; compare 7:1–27).

Along with the Song of Songs, Proverbs gives one of the most beautiful passages commending lifelong marriage:

Drink water from your own cistern,
flowing water from your own well.
Should your springs be scattered abroad,
streams of water in the streets?
Let them be for yourself alone,
and not for sharing with strangers.
Let your fountain be blessed,
and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
May her breasts satisfy you at all times;
may you be intoxicated always by her love.
Why should you be intoxicated, my son, by another woman
and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?
For human ways are under the eyes of the Lord,
and he examines all their paths.
The iniquities of the wicked ensnare them,
and they are caught in the toils of their sin.
They die for lack of discipline,
and because of their great folly they are lost (Prov. 5:15–23).

The mature outworking of this comes in the description of 'a capable wife' at the end of the Book of Proverbs:

- ¹⁰ A capable wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
¹¹ The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.

- ¹² She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.
- ¹³ She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.
- ¹⁴ She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.
- ¹⁵ She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.
- ¹⁶ She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
- ¹⁷ She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.
- ¹⁸ She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.
- ¹⁹ She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
- ²⁰ She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.
- ²¹ She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.
- ²² She makes herself coverings;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
- ²³ Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.
- ²⁴ She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.
- ²⁵ Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
- ²⁶ She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
- ²⁷ She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
- ²⁸ Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:
- ²⁹ 'Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.'
- ³⁰ Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
- ³¹ Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates (Proverbs 31:10–31).

She is a remarkable woman. She respects and supports her husband (v. 12), and he trusts and relies on her (11). She is clearly a key factor in his success (11, 23), and he greatly appreciates her (28, 29). She cares well and effectively for her family (14, 15, 27), and richly provides for them under all circumstances (21). No doubt her children, as well as her husband, benefit from her wise teaching (26), and they too recognise her happiness and worth (28, 29).

She is a competent, diligent and astute business-woman: in trade (14, 18, 24), real estate (16), primary production (16), and cottage industry—manufacturing and value-adding with a view to merchandising (13, 18, 19, 24); also in small business and personnel management (15).

In addition to this, she is active in the community: in her care for the poor and needy (20), in the salutary advice she has to offer (26), and in the public recognition that is due to her (31).

She is able to do all this without neglecting herself: she keeps herself fit (17), she dresses well (22), and has an inner strength and dignity by which she faces the future with cheerful assurance. Hers is no put-on or superficial beauty: the secret of her inner strength and beauty is that she 'fears the LORD'—she has a personal relationship of respectful trust and obedient love towards God (30).

Just reading this through is enough to make us feel exhausted! Who ever said that the Bible puts women down, or says that a woman's place is only in the kitchen or the nursery? This woman is no wimp, and no doormat. She is a person of great stature and attractiveness.

She is a woman of true glory, and her glory comes in the context of a rightly ordered relationship with God and with her husband.

Wisdom and the Good Wife

There is a strong connection made between marriage and our covenant relationship with God:

You will be saved from the loose woman,
from the adventuress with her smooth words,
who forsakes the companion of her youth
and forgets the covenant of her God (Prov. 2:16–17 RSV).

The good wife in Proverbs 31 is a real-life person, but there are also what appear to be deliberate cross-references to the allegorical female figure of wisdom in the earlier chapters. 'She is far more precious than jewels' (Prov. 31:10)—compare what is attributed to wisdom:

She is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare with her (Prov. 3:15; compare 8:11; 20:15).

At the end of the depiction of the good wife, we feel the same 'vibes' coming through as we feel with regard to the earlier female figure of wisdom. It appears that the book of Proverbs concludes with the virtual incarnation of wisdom in a good wife—perhaps in anticipation of what the New Testament will have to say about the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:21–32; Rev. 19:6–9; 21:1–22:5; contrast foolish 'Babylon' in Rev. 17–18). If this is so, then this is wisdom in life indeed!