

Words of Truth



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Proverbs 22, 23, Exod. 22:21–27, Proverbs 24, Eph. 5:20, Ezek. 33:8.*

Memory Text: “Have I not written to you excellent things of counsels and knowledge, that I may make you know the certainty of the words of truth, that you may answer words of truth to those who send to you?” (*Proverbs 22:20, 21, NKJV*).

Some of this week's proverbs show parallels with Egyptian texts. Under inspiration, Solomon might have shaped these texts according to a specifically Hebrew perspective. Here, the words of the Egyptians meet the Spirit of Israel's God; and thus, they became divine revelation.

This observation is important, for it reminds us of the universal character of “truth.” What is true for the Israelite should also be true for the Egyptian; otherwise, it would not be the truth. It is important to remember that God's truths apply universally, to everyone.

The domain of these admonitions is common to both communities. That is, whoever you are, whether a believer or not, and wherever you live, there are some things that *you should not do*.

* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 28.*

The Knowledge of Truth

Read Proverbs 22:17, 18. What are we being told about how truth should impact our lives?

The first duty of the student is to listen and pay attention: “Incline your ear and hear” (*Prov. 22:17, NKJV*). In other words: “Concentrate!” The crucial point is that the seeker of truth must be earnest, must truly want to learn what is right, and then do it.

But it is not enough for the student to listen or even to understand, intellectually, what is being taught. Some people who have a lot of biblical facts in their heads have no real knowledge or experience with the Truth (*John 14:6*).

Instead, truth should reach the innermost part of the human being. The Hebrew phrase in Proverbs 22:18, “within you” (*NKJV*), refers to the stomach. The lesson should not stay on the surface; it has to be digested, assimilated, and become an inner part of our beings. Once the message has gone deep into our system and becomes rooted within us, it will then rise to our lips, and we can have a powerful testimony.

Read Proverbs 22:19–21. What should an experience in truth do for us?

1. *Faith (vs. 19)*. The first goal of the teaching of wisdom is not wisdom *per se*. Proverbs does not aim at making more intelligent and more skillful disciples. The teacher’s objective is to strengthen the disciple’s trust in the Lord.

2. *Conviction (vs. 21)*. Students should know why these “words of truth” (*NKJV*) are certain; they should know why they believe what they do. Faith by definition is belief in what we don’t fully understand. Nevertheless, we still should have good reasons for that faith.

3. *Responsibility (vs. 21)*. The last step of education is to share with others those “words of truth” (*NKJV*) we have received. This is central to our whole calling as a people.

Think about all the powerfully logical reasons we have for our Seventh-day Adventist faith. What are these reasons, and why should we never hesitate in keeping them ever before us and sharing them with others? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Robbing the Poor

Read Proverbs 22:22, 23; 23:10. What are we warned about here?

Though it's always wrong to steal, this prohibition concerns stealing from the poor and the oppressed, who are the most vulnerable. They are truly helpless, and therefore they qualify for God's special concern (*Exod. 22:21–27*). The case of David, who killed Uriah in order to steal his wife, and Nathan's parable of the ewe lamb (*2 Sam. 12:1–4*) come to mind. Robbing from the poor is not just a criminal act: it is a sin "against the LORD" (*2 Sam. 12:13*). To take from someone who has less than what you have is worse than stealing; it is also an act of cowardice. *Do these thieves think that God doesn't see their actions?*

Indeed, Proverbs 22:23 implies that even if the thief gets away with no human punishment, God will repay. The reference to the Redeemer, the *Goel* (*Prov. 23:11*), may even allude to the divine scenario of end-time judgment (*Job 19:25*).

So, this warning, along with others in the Bible, speaks against those who are interested only in the immediate "gains" of their actions and not the long-term results. They take possession and enlarge their properties at the expense of others, and they are willing to cheat and kill for that purpose. They may enjoy it now, but they will pay later. This reasoning should not only discourage the thief; it should show that our ethical values are intricately tied to the Sovereignty of God.

In England, some atheists had the following slogan placed on city buses: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." Though there are many retorts one could give in response, think about this one: *if there were no God, then those who steal from the poor, and are getting away with it now, really have nothing to worry about. Indeed, all those who have done great evil and seem to have gotten away with it will, in fact, have really gotten away with it.* How should faith in God and in His promises of judgment help to give us some peace of mind regarding all the injustice we see in the world now?

Being Jealous of the Wicked

What do Proverbs 23:17; 24:1, 2; and 24:19, 20 warn us about?

Why would someone envy the wicked? Most likely it's not because of the actual sins that they might be committing. Rather, it's usually because of the immediate gain (wealth, success, power) that they achieve through their wickedness—that's what people often covet for themselves.

Though, of course, not every successful or rich person is wicked, some are—and they are probably the kind of people we are being warned about in these verses. We see their “good” life and, from our perspective, especially if we are struggling ourselves, it's easy to envy what they have.

This, though, is a very narrow and shortsighted view of things. After all, the temptation of sin is that its reward is immediate: we enjoy the present gratification. A perspective beyond the present can protect us from temptation; that is, we need to look beyond the immediate “gains” of our sin and think through the long-term consequences.

Besides, who hasn't seen just how destructive sin is? We never get away with it. We might be able to hide it from others so that no one, even those closest to us, has a clue about what we are doing (though sooner or later they catch on, don't they?); or we might be able to delude ourselves into thinking that our sins are not that bad. (*After all, look at how many people do worse things!*) But sooner or later, one way or another, sin catches up with us.

We should hate sin because it is sin. We should hate it because of what it has done to us, to our world, and to our Lord. If we want to see the real cost of sin, look at Jesus on the cross. This is what our sin has cost. That realization alone should be enough (though so often it isn't) to make us want to avoid sin and to keep away as much as possible from those who would lead us into it.

Have you ever struggled with envy over someone's success? What's the best remedy for this spiritually deadly problem? (*See Eph. 5:20.*)

What We Put in Our Mouths

It is no accident that the first human temptation concerned food (*Gen. 3:3*). It was being disobedient and eating of the wrong thing that brought sin and death into the world (*Gen. 3:1–7, Rom. 5:12*). We shouldn't miss the hard fact, too, that the first mention of wine drinking in the Bible is presented in a terribly negative and degrading story (*Gen. 9:21*).

Read Proverbs 23:29–35. How is the use of alcohol presented in these verses?

Who hasn't seen personally just how devastating alcohol can be? Sure, not everyone who drinks becomes a drunk in the gutter. But most likely drunks in the gutter never imagined, the first time they took a drink, that they would eventually wind up in the gutter.

"The man who has formed the habit of drinking intoxicating liquor, is in a desperate situation. He cannot be reasoned with, or persuaded to deny himself the indulgence. His stomach and brain are diseased, his will power is weakened, and his appetite uncontrollable. The prince of the powers of darkness holds him in bondage that he has no power to break."—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1162.

Read Proverbs 23:1–8. Why should we control our appetites?

This admonition is about more than table manners. The biblical text is a warning to those who like to eat and who have great appetites (*Prov. 23:2*). The metaphor of putting a knife to one's throat is particularly strong: it not only means curbing the appetite but also suggests the risk to your health and even your life that could be caused by overeating. The Hebrew word (*bin*), translated "consider carefully," expresses the idea of carefully deciding between eating various kinds of food. The same word is used by Solomon when he asks for wisdom to help him "discern [*bin*] between good and evil" (*1 Kings 3:9, NKJV*). The inspired writer has more in mind than just the issue of appetite control. His counsel may also concern banquets and social drinking, when we are pressured and tempted to "desire his delicacies" (*Prov. 23:3, NKJV*).

Think about someone you know whose life has been destroyed by alcohol. Why should that example alone be enough to help you to understand why you should never put that poison in your body?

Our Responsibilities

“When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you shall surely die!’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand” (Ezek. 33:8, NKJV). What basic spiritual principle is revealed here? How do we take this concept and apply it to our everyday lives?

Years ago, in a big Western city, a woman was being attacked at night on a street. She cried out for help; dozens heard her, yet not one person even bothered to call the police. Most people looked out the window and then went back to whatever they were doing. Soon the woman’s cries stopped. Later, she was found dead, stabbed numerous times.

Were the people who heard her cries but did nothing responsible for her death? Though they hadn’t attacked her themselves, did their inaction kill her?

Read Proverbs 24:11, 12, 23–28. What important messages are here for us?

The law of Moses clearly warns that those who fail to report what they witness will bear guilt (*Lev. 5:1*). We may not be able to act against crime, but if we keep silent about what we see, we then share the guilt with the criminal. By our silence, we become accomplices.

On the other hand, if we report the truth in our testimony, giving the “right answer” (*Prov. 24:26*), we respond appropriately and behave as responsible people. This act is compared to a kiss on the lips, meaning that the person cares about another person.

It’s tragic enough to remain silent and do nothing as a woman is being murdered on your street. But what about many of the other evils in the world: hunger, war, injustice, racism, economic oppression? What are our responsibilities here, as well?

Further Study: “Souls around us must be aroused and saved, or they perish. Not a moment have we to lose. We all have an influence that tells for the truth or against it. I desire to carry with me unmistakable evidences that I am one of Christ’s disciples. We want something besides Sabbath religion. We need the living principle, and to daily feel individual responsibility. This is shunned by many, and the fruit is carelessness, indifference, a lack of watchfulness and spirituality.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 99.

“Talk faith, live faith, cultivate love to God; evidence to the world all that Jesus is to you. Magnify His holy name. Tell of His goodness; talk of His mercy, and tell of His power.”—Ellen G. White, *Our High Calling*, p. 20.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, go over your answer to Sunday’s final question. What can we learn from each other’s answers? What are ways that we can learn to build up our faith in what we believe?
- 2 Someone wrote: “Remember two things: Christ died for you, and you will one day die.” In the context of Tuesday’s study, which talked about how we will have to answer for sin one way or another, what crucial lesson should we take away from this thought?
- 3 Here again is the quote put on the buses in London: “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” Besides what the lesson talked about, what other problems do you find with that sentiment? Why would God’s existence be something that would make people worry to begin with? What does this sentiment tell us about how well Satan has distorted the character of God in the minds of many people? In class, come up with different ways in which you could respond to that slogan. What are some short, pithy slogans that could help people to see the hope that we can have in God?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Proverbs 24:12*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that God sees his or her innermost thoughts and hidden deeds.

Feel: Foster appreciation for God’s discipline, even when it is strict.

Do: Choose to live honestly, as though his or her thoughts and deeds are heard and seen by all.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God Sees Our Hidden Thoughts and Deeds.

- A** Why does God watch us always?
- B** How does our awareness of God’s watching eye help us in terms of accountability and transparency? How does such awareness help us spiritually?
- C** Why is it easy to forget that Christ is the Judge of the world, as well as its Savior?

II. Feel: God’s Strict Discipline

- A** Why does truth sometimes feel restrictive and harsh?
- B** Why do people often lie by saying, “I didn’t know” or “I can’t remember”?
- C** Why do Christians sometimes experience burnout?

III. Do: Speak the Truth Always.

- A** Why do some governments often rely on covert operations and even tell outright lies?
- B** How can there be security if one always tells the truth?
- C** Why are governments that use lies as their modus operandi more unstable than those that speak the truth?
- D** What is the difference between telling the truth and unnecessarily disclosing or volunteering information?

► **Summary:** Truth is the surest and the simplest way to live one’s life. God recognizes and blesses those who live truthfully. Lies always lose.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Proverbs 24:12*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Truth is God: who He is, what He expects from us, and why He cares about how we treat others. He expects us to live in a way that is consistent with what we know about Him. It is easy to think that because salvation is by grace, we are free to behave or think as we wish. This is an error. Our actions must be consistent with the truth that we believe.

Just for Teachers: This week’s lesson stresses the importance of truth. Truth is not simply intellectual. It is about coming to know God as He is. He loves those who practice compassion and justice and hates the actions of those who trump compassion and justice with money and power. To receive compassion from God, we must show compassion. If we want justice, we must deal justly with others.

Opening Discussion: Even the bravest of generals may shake in fear when his or her lies are discovered. Even the most corrupt and oppressive regimes often try to put on a face of truth. What makes truth so powerful?

Questions for Discussion:

- ❶ Secrecy is essential for security. What is the difference between secrecy and lies? What would happen if all our private activities and conversations became known to all?
- ❷ The truth sometimes hurts. How can we tell the truth without hurting people? Why is it easier to lie about feelings than about facts?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Truth is the reason for the existence of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We believe that truth exists and that it is found in Jesus and that Jesus has given us a special message for our time. We call this “present truth.” What is “present truth”? What does that mean? How do we understand that concept?

Bible Commentary

Proverbs 22:17–29 concludes the preceding discussion about judgment (*Proverbs 20–22:16*) and, at the same time, introduces the present discussion about truth (*Proverbs 23, 24*). Proverbs 23 calls upon the reader to be truthful even when it is difficult to do so. Truth may cost you your job or even your life, but it is still the best and only safe course in life. Proverbs 24 points out that everyone knows in the depths of their hearts whether or not they have acted according to their consciences.

I. The Truth About God (*Review Proverbs 22:17–29 with your class.*)

This week’s lesson begins with the closing verses of chapter 22 (*vss. 17–29*). We saw last week that chapter 22 is about the reward of wisdom. This week’s focus is on truth.

What is truth? Truth is first and foremost about God, that He exists and that He is the Defender of the poor and oppressed. Proverbs warns, “Rob not the poor, . . . for the LORD will plead their cause” (*vss. 22, 23*).

The second truth is that those who practice vices will end up in ruin. Solomon sums up vices through two images: “an angry man” (*vs. 24*) and a man who removes “the ancient landmark” (*vs. 28*). Both of these images depict the heartlessness and arrogance of those who perpetrate vices (*compare 23:10*). They may appear to flourish for a time, but they will suddenly come to ruin.

The third truth is that hard work and perseverance will be rewarded. Proverbs promises, “He shall stand before kings” (*22:29*). Seen against this backdrop, the truth described in Proverbs 22:17–29 bears a close resemblance to the fourth commandment (*Exod. 20:8–11*). The Sabbath commandment demands that we (1) remember God, who created the world (*vss. 8, 11*); (2) show compassion (*vs. 10*); and (3) work hard (*vs. 9*). “Do all thy work,” the commandment says (*vs. 9*). Truth in the Bible is ethical, it never changes, and it is about God.

Consider This: What are the three ways in which Proverbs defines truth?

II. The Truth About Envy and Pleasure (*Review Proverbs 23 with your class.*)

Envy is like standing in a long line at a theme park, waiting for a very short and disappointing ride. Like a long line, envy makes us believe that there is something good waiting for us at the end of the line. And envy makes us look upon those already on the rides with longing eyes.

Sometimes Christians, unfortunately, envy the world for two reasons: (1) the pleasures of the world appear relaxing and fun, and (2) the will of

God appears strict and disciplinary. The “pleasures” of this world come with food served on silver platters in a mansion (*vss. 1–8*), with immorality (*vss. 27, 28*), and with wine (*vss. 29–35*). But the wisdom of God comes with a knife for your throat (*vs. 2*), a rod on your back (*vs. 14*), and reins for your lips (*vs. 16*). For it is painful to subject our selfish and wandering hearts to the discipline of God.

However, the rewards of wisdom are weighty and eternal. So, do not grow weary of God’s strict discipline, envying the people of the world. Comparing the fretting of our hearts to a spoiled child, Solomon says, you “will not die” (*vs. 13, NKJV*). The people of this world wait in a long line with eager expectation and envy, but the weary wait will bring them nothing but contention and disappointment.

Consider This: Why did Christ tell those who wanted to follow Him to enter the narrow way and to take up the cross (*Matt. 7:14, Mark 8:34*)?

III. Be Honest; You Know the Truth (*Review Proverbs 24 with your class.*)

Proverbs 24:1 opens with a warning not to envy those who build their empires by means of vices. The chapter opens with a contrast between lies and truth and how they affect our lives (*vss. 2–10*). Lies ruin your reputation and weaken you because you become “an abomination” to all when your lies are discovered (*vs. 9*). In addition, “in the day of adversity,” falling into an emotional sinkhole, you will find no strength to stand (*vs. 10*).

Truth, by contrast, has the opposite effects. It builds us up with spiritual riches (*vss. 3, 4*). Unlike lies, truth will help us to increase and to feel strong and safe (*vss. 5, 6, 16*). We will be in a fortified city with walls that are “too high” for our foes (*vs. 7*). Truth just has more staying power than lies, because what is true is also real.

Verses 11–29 offer further warnings about lying. Even if someone’s lies are never discovered, he or she knows and God knows when the person has told a lie. Solomon offers three case studies of such lying: (1) one who sees someone in trouble and does not help, and then later says, “We did not know” (*vs. 12, NKJV*); (2) one who sees one’s opponent in trouble and becomes happy, but pretends not to notice it (*vs. 17*); and (3) one who gives preferential treatment to someone because he or she is rich and powerful (*vss. 23–25*).

In all of these cases, the person telling the lie knows that he or she has done something evil. Why else would he or she try to hide it? “In the day when God will judge the secrets” (*Rom. 2:16, NKJV*), He will repay each of us according to our works, whether good or evil.

Consider This: Chapter 24 ends with a parable about a slothful person (*vss. 30–34*) and concludes the discussion on truth. How does this story

apply to the concept of discipline and truth found in Proverbs 23 and 24?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The truth is about God, that He sees in secret, and that He is a just and compassionate God. It also means that we do not treat anyone with disrespect just because he or she is poor and without status. Explain to the class that truth is something beautiful, like mercy and righteousness. It is menacing only to those who have lied.

Application Questions:

① If someone who is socially insignificant asks to see you, and you reply, “I am busy right now,” what consequences does this lie have on you?

② What happened to Christianity when it gave preferential treatment to its wealthy members and powerful dignitaries (such as the Emperor Constantine)?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: It requires discipline and courage to be truthful, especially when dealing with powerful individuals whose decisions could have negative consequences for us. We fear to offend them. Proverbs tells us that God hates this kind of behavior, especially if we turn around and treat weaker people with disrespect and neglect.

Activities:

① Ask your class to make a covenant with God in which everything they say and do will be true. This does not mean that they will divulge confidences, volunteer information unnecessarily, or disclose what they know without just cause, but rather that whatever they say will be true.

② Ask your class to show respect and VIP treatment to members in their community and in their families who they feel are weaker than themselves and to report their experiences back to the class.
