

Words of Wisdom



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Proverbs 20; 1 Cor. 12:14–26; Jer. 9:23, 24; Proverbs 21; Matt. 25:35–40; Proverbs 22.*

Memory Text: “Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, but who can find a faithful man?” (*Proverbs 20:6, NKJV*).

To some degree (a great degree, actually), we are all products of our environment. Though heredity plays a big role, the values we hold come to us from what is around us—our home, our education, our culture. From infancy we are impacted by what we see and hear.

Unfortunately, what we see and hear isn't always the best for us; the world around us is fallen in every way, and it cannot help impacting us negatively. Nevertheless, we have been given the promise of the Holy Spirit, and we have God's Word, which points us to something higher and better than the world does.

This week we will look at various proverbs and the practical truths they express, truths that, if taken to heart and followed, can, indeed, help us to overcome the negativity of this fallen world and prepare us for a better one.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 21.

We Are All Equal

Read Proverbs 20:12. What does this teach us about the value of all humans?

Unlike the theory of evolution, which considers us all to be nothing but chance products of a mindless cosmos, the Bible teaches that all humans were created by God (*see also Acts 17:26*). It is no accident, either, that Thomas Jefferson asserted the equality of all humans precisely because they were “created” by God. It’s in the Lord, and in Him alone, that we have our equality.

Now, though we all have the same Maker, this doesn’t mean we are all the same. Even identical twins don’t wind up behaving exactly alike. In Corinthians, Paul talks about our differences and stresses that they should not lead to a sense of superiority but should, instead, help us to see our need for one another. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (*1 Cor. 12:21, NKJV*).

Read Proverbs 20:9. What else makes us all equal?

Sin is another universal equalizer. To the rhetorical question of the proverb, the answer “no one” points to the tragic and hopeless condition of humankind. Humans are all weak and mortal, and all the money and power in the world will not change that. Yet, in the context of the Scriptures, this reference to human sinfulness should not lead to despair, because Jesus’ death on the cross and His resurrection have paved the way for anyone, no matter how sinful, to have the promise of eternal life. And this life comes solely through faith in Him—not by our works.

“If man cannot, by any of his good works, merit salvation, then it must be wholly of grace, received by man as a sinner because he receives and believes in Jesus. It is wholly a free gift. Justification by faith is placed beyond controversy. And all this controversy is ended, as soon as the matter is settled that the merits of fallen man in his good works can never procure eternal life for him.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, p. 20.

Do you ever find yourself feeling superior (or inferior) to other people? (You shouldn’t be comparing yourself to others anyway.) If so, what should the Cross tell you about the equality of us all?

The Test of Life

“‘Their works follow them,’” says Revelation 14:13 (*NKJV*) about the reward of the righteous. Only the future will testify to the real value of the individual. People may boast now of their wealth, their knowledge, their physical prowess, and maybe that is all true. But what does it mean in the sight of God? So often the traits, accomplishments, and deeds that humans uplift as important or impressive are shown to be the meaningless dross that they really are. After all, look at some of the despicable characters, often in the entertainment industry, who are all but worshiped and adored by fans. What we idolize and worship presents a powerful testimony to how fallen we are.

Read Proverbs 20:6 (see also *Jer. 9:23, 24; Mark 9:35*). **What are these texts telling us about what is of true value to God?**

It is not the single sensational act of love or sacrifice that will demonstrate the high quality of our relationships but the long and regular series of small actions that we perform day by day, patiently and surely. The daily meal served to your spouse, the constant attention to a sick parent, the continued effort in your job; all these humble acts throughout life are the evidence that your faith is authentic. Enduring faithfulness is more valuable than intense but rare acts of love.

This principle holds true for our relationship with God, as well. It is more difficult and more valuable to live for God than to die for Him, if for no other reason than that living takes more time than dying. The saint who lives for God is greater than the martyr who dies for Him. Anyone can claim to believe in God and to serve Him; the question is: *Does it last?* Or, as Jesus said, “‘He who endures to the end shall be saved’” (*Matt. 24:13, NKJV*).

How, through patience, kindness, and a willingness to meet others’ needs, can you reveal to someone something of the character of Christ? How willing are you to do this, no matter the cost to yourself?

Waiting for the Lord

Read Proverbs 20:17, 21:5. What practical lesson can we find in these texts?

The thief who steals bread gets it faster than the one who has to work for it. Salespeople who lie to sell their bad merchandise may become rich faster than the honest merchant (*compare Prov. 21:5 to the next verse*). Yet, says the proverb, the future will turn the sweetness into “gravel,” and the hastily acquired wealth will become poverty. The text gives a number of examples to illustrate the accuracy of this observation:

1. *The Inheritance (Prov. 20:21)*. The mention of an inheritance obtained too quickly (implying that the parents are still alive) follows the condemnation of the one who curses his parents (*vs. 20*). The association of these two proverbs is significant. It is as if the son (or the daughter) curses the parents and also wishes them dead. The child may even have plotted the death of the parents in order to get the inheritance. The prospect of this behavior is tragic: the lamp he is presently enjoying will become “deep darkness” (*vs. 20, NKJV*), and his curse against his parents will turn on him, for he “will not be blessed at the end” (*vs. 21, NKJV*).

2. *Revenge (Prov. 20:22)*. This time the proverb addresses the victim who may be tempted to seek revenge for the evil that has been committed against him. The counsel is just to “wait for the LORD” (*NKJV*). Only then will you be saved, which implies that if you do seek revenge you are taking a serious risk. Proverbs 25:21, 22 emphasizes the same instruction, using the metaphor of heaping coals of fire on the enemy’s head, an Egyptian ritual expressing repentance and conversion. If you refrain from revenge, promises Proverbs 20:22, you will be saved by the Lord and, in the process (adds Proverbs 25:21, 22) you will save your enemy, thus overcoming evil with good (*Rom. 12:21*).

How can you learn to emulate the character of Christ more closely when it comes to overcoming evil with good? Why is this so contrary to our inherent nature? Why is death to self the only way to achieve this end?

Compassion for the Poor

A person's character is measured less by wisdom or even religious commitments than by readiness to help the poor and the needy. It is not what you have that measures your character. Who you are to your neighbor is the measure of character. The Samaritan who saves his neighbor is closer to the kingdom of God than the spiritual priest (*Luke 10:26–37*). The book of Proverbs emphasizes and explains this priority.

For God's sake: The first reason to make this a priority lies in God Himself, who prefers human compassion for the poor over our religious zeal (*Prov. 19:17, 21:13*). Your sensitivity to the poor and your concrete deeds on their behalf will count more with God than will any of your pious acts. In fact, God is personally invested in that work, so much so that when we give to the poor, it is as if we are giving to God Himself (*Matt. 25:35–40*).

Read Matthew 25:35–40. What does this tell us about how Jesus identifies so closely with those in need? How should this truth impact how we relate to such people?

For the sake of the poor: The second reason lies within the poor person, whom God has created just as He has created the rich person (*Prov. 22:2*). The equality between humans, based on the fact that God has created them all, makes the poor as worthy of attention as the rich person. We should love our neighbors for who they are: beings made in the image of God.

At the same time, think about how much good it does you to help those in need. Our basic natures are selfish; by default we tend to look out for ourselves over and above others. By giving of ourselves, we learn to die to self and to better reflect Christ's character, and what is of more value to us than that?

In what ways do you get a greater sense of personal satisfaction from helping others in need than only doing things for yourself?

Education

The Hebrew word for “education” comes from a word that means “to build up” and “to begin.” All these meanings are contained in the Hebrew idea of education: when we “train up a child” (*Prov. 22:6*), we build up, we begin, and we lay the groundwork for the future. Parents and educators are therefore responsible for their children’s future and, by implication, the future of the world. What we do with our children today will impact society for generations to come.

Read Proverbs 22:6. What does this say about the importance of educating children correctly?

It is significant that the Hebrew word for “educate” is the very word used for the “dedication” of the temple (*1 Kings 8:63*). Early education means to dedicate our children to God in the same way that the temple is dedicated to God. Education has an impact on our salvation, even beyond our own life. “To parents is committed the great work of educating and training their children for the future, immortal life.” —Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 38. Such education has an eternal effect. The apostle Paul seems to allude to Proverbs 22:6 when he commends Timothy for his early training in the knowledge of “the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation” (*2 Tim. 3:15, NKJV*).

Read Proverbs 22:8, 15. What principles do we find here?

Education can be compared to the activity of “sowing.” The future of our society and of our children depends on what we have sown. If our seed was “iniquity,” then our education (“the rod”) will fail, and we shall reap trouble (*vs. 8*). If our seed touched the hearts of the children (*vs. 15*), then the rod of our education will drive the children’s foolishness far from them.

We so often teach others (especially children) by our example. Think about your example: What kind of legacy are you leaving? In what areas, if any, might your example be better?

Further Study: “Parents should be models of truthfulness, for this is the daily lesson to be impressed upon the heart of the child. Undeviating principle should govern parents in all the affairs of life, especially in the education and training of their children. . . . Parents, never prevaricate; never tell an untruth in precept or in example. If you want your child to be truthful, be truthful yourself.”—Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 151.

“Many fathers and mothers seem to think that if they feed and clothe their little ones, and educate them according to the standard of the world, they have done their duty. They are too much occupied with business or pleasure to make the education of their children the study of their lives. They do not seek to train them so that they will employ their talents for the honor of their Redeemer. Solomon did not say, ‘Tell a child the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.’ But, ‘Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 38.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell more on the idea of Proverbs 22:6. Why must we be careful in how we apply this? That is, many parents have done a good job in rearing their children, and yet as adults those children make wrong choices. Why must we never forget the reality of free will and the reality of the great controversy as we look at the meaning of this text?
- 2 Look again at the final question at the end of Wednesday’s study. What does it tell us about ourselves that we get such a sense of satisfaction from helping others, especially when we get nothing in return? What should this truth tell us about why so many people who have so much of the world’s riches are miserable nonetheless?
- 3 Though we are not all equal in talents, education, experience, and so forth, we are equal in the most important thing: we all need the Cross for salvation. What should this teach us about the basic equality and worth of all human beings? More so, how should this truth impact how we treat all people?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Proverbs 20:28*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand the cause-and-effect relationship between mercy and judgment.

Feel: Appreciate the intangible rewards of wisdom more than the tangible rewards of earthly riches.

Do: Choose good judgment over the immediate gratification and quick fixes that vices offer.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Cause-and-Effect Relationship Between Mercy and Judgment

- A** How can mercy and truth preserve a king? How are they more effective than an army or wealth?
- B** Why is good judgment essential for a king (*compare Prov. 20:2, 8, 26*)?
- C** Explain why communities that are merciful and true are more likely to safeguard qualities such as patience, transparency, and firmness than communities that are cruel and dishonest?

II. Feel: The Superiority of the Intangible Rewards of Wisdom

- A** Why should schools place more emphasis on mercy and judgment in their curriculums, and what would be the benefits of doing so?
- B** What are the rewards of keeping the Sabbath? Are they mostly tangible or intangible? Explain. Why did you find them attractive?
- C** Why does the Bible often describe God in terms of invisible attributes, such as righteousness, holiness, and compassion?

III. Do: Avoid Vices.

- A** What happens to the family of a parent who is contentious, arrogant, and coldhearted?
- B** Name some leaders or individuals in history who are known for their vices. Explain why they made such poor choices in life and made other people's lives so miserable in the process.

► **Summary:** Mercy and truth may not bring you money or status, but they will help you make the best choices in life and give you power to create communities that flourish and grow.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Proverbs 20:28*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Good judgment is everything in life. In some situations, it can mean life or death. Companies lose millions of dollars; homes break up; accidents happen at sea, in the sky, and on roads, resulting in terrible losses of life—all because someone made an error in judgment. Proverbs warns us that we cannot have success in any line of work without good judgment. Thus, we must seek to avoid all things that becloud our judgment.

Just for Teachers: It takes a human being to make a judgment. Animals possess judgment, but their capacity for judgment is extremely limited compared to ours. For example, as far as we know, they make no ethical judgments regarding what is good, true, and just. Computers cannot make judgments beyond what they have been programmed to do. It takes a human being to make a final judgment. Proverbs tells us that what defines us as human is compassion. Indeed, even animals seem human when they show compassion. Therefore, mercy helps us to make superior judgments because it makes us more human.

Opening Discussion: Explain why some cars or homes sell for much more money than others. Why do people pay top dollar for them? What do they see in them? Explain what words such as *excellence*, *safety*, *reliability*, and *high quality* mean to you. Why do people allow these invisible ideals to guide their expensive purchases?

Questions for Discussion:

- ① Name objects that are safe and reliable. Why do they make you feel safe and secure? How was Jesus able to provide safety and reliability to His disciples without actually providing those things as objects?
- ② Paul and Silas, who were beaten, hungry, and fettered, sang praises to God in a dark and damp prison (*Acts 16:19–25*). While they may have owned next to nothing in the way of worldly goods, what did they have?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: To achieve happiness in life, we must achieve balance between the spiritual and the physical or material. From Solomon's

time to our own, there has been a terrible imbalance in society in favor of the material; namely, what money can buy. Proverbs calls us back to the beauty and incomparable worth of spiritual riches.

Bible Commentary

Just for Teachers: The proverbs in chapters 20–22 may appear to repeat some of the same proverbs from the previous chapters without much organization. When we read these chapters, it is important to keep two things in mind. First, the first line of each chapter (and often the first few words) announces the topic of the chapter. This may not apply to all the chapters in Proverbs, but it certainly applies to chapters 20 and 21.

Second, many of the terms used in these chapters, such as “name” or “silver and gold,” are metonyms. The term metonym means that the author has substituted a word or a phrase for another word or phrase. For example, “name” is a metonym for reputation and “silver and gold” for earthly riches. In other words, Proverbs is written like a riddle or a crossword puzzle. In the commentary below, metonyms have been suggested for the words or phrases contained within the proverbs in these chapters. It would be a good idea to take your class through some of the proverbs to see if you can figure out their metonyms on your own.

I. Sound Judgment (*Review Proverbs 20 with your class.*)

The topic of Proverbs 20 is sound judgment. Verse 1 mentions “wine” because it is an agent that beclouds judgment. The beating in verse 30, of course, has the opposite effect on a person. It wakes you up and makes you think straight. Beating in Proverbs is a metaphor for discipline and should not be taken literally.

The chapter also mentions “king” four times (*vss. 2, 8, 26, 28*) to reinforce the importance of judgment. Imagine what would happen to a country, Solomon asks, if a king lacked judgment. The most important mark of sound judgment is decisiveness, the quality of knowing when to start (*vss. 4, 15*), when to stop (*vs. 3*), and when to say No (*vs. 16*). Sound judgment is also marked by discernment, the ability to recognize good counsel (*vs. 18*) and to exercise good common sense (*vs. 19*). To have such qualities, one must be merciful (*vss. 20, 21, 28, 29*) and humble, always aware of one’s own shortcomings (*vs. 9; compare vs. 5*) and of God’s watchful eyes that search our motives and innermost thoughts (*vss. 5, 12, 24, 27*). The life of those with judgment will be marked by transparency (*vss. 7, 10, 14, 23*), patience (*vss. 17, 22*), and firmness (*vs. 25*) in all things.

Consider This: We live in an age of confusing options, with so many

new ideas, opportunities, and technological and medical innovations that the Bible does not directly address, though it does give us crucial principles. Therefore we might look for people who can help us make the right choices. What qualities do you look for in people whose judgment you trust?

II. Habits That Destroy Judgment *(Review Proverbs 21 with your class.)*

Proverbs 21 continues the topic of judgment from the previous chapter. This is clear from the mention of “king” and the formula “the Lord pondereth the hearts,” in verses 1, 2. Furthermore, the word *judgment* appears in verses 3, 7, and 15.

But this chapter differs from chapter 20 in its emphasis. Its focus is on what beclouds judgment. Proverbs 21 is a list of intellectual and emotional habits that, when indulged, cripple one’s judgment. The list is rather long, but the underlying principle is clear: you lose judgment when you indulge in vices. The people who love vices are proud (*vss. 4, 24*), hasty (*vs. 5*), dishonest (*vss. 6, 7, 28*), crooked (*vs. 8*), contentious (*vss. 9, 19*), desirous of evil (*vs. 10*), scornful (*vs. 11*), wicked (*vss. 15, 18, 27*), without compassion (*vs. 13*), corrupt (*vs. 14*), distracted (*vs. 16*), given to pleasure (*vs. 17*), wasteful (*vs. 20*), overconfident (*vs. 22*), loquacious (*vs. 23*), lazy (*vs. 25*), stingy and greedy (*vs. 26*), hypocritical (*vs. 27*), coldhearted (*vs. 29*), and against God (*vss. 30, 31*).

The underlying principle is that you cannot have good judgment if you enjoy vices. This is why a leader must be a person of character who has a compassionate heart (*vs. 21*). The problem, of course, is that humans have a natural bent toward vices.

Discussion Questions: Why do vices hold such attraction for people? Why do vices flourish in large cities? How can we find time on Sabbath to show compassion to those who need help, both inside and outside the church?

III. The Reward of Wisdom *(Review Proverbs 22 with your class.)*

The opening line of Proverbs 22—“A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches” (*vs. 1*)—announces the chapter’s topic: the reward of wisdom. To our modern minds, a good name and great riches are often synonymous.

Not so for Proverbs. The reward that wisdom promises is, like a good name, intangible, because those who pursue tangible rewards, such as money, often become corrupt in the end. The reward of wisdom is significant and multifaceted. For example, wisdom helps you to recognize danger and avoid it (*vs. 3*), to be humble (*vs. 5*), to know how to educate a child (*vs. 6*), to be generous (*vs. 9*), to have a pure heart, to know how and when to speak (*vs. 11*), and to enjoy God’s protection (*vs. 12*).

In stark contrast, folly brings only sorrow in its tow. By pursuing earthly riches, many find their lives filled with emptiness (*vs. 8*), contention (*vs. 10*), laziness (*vs. 13*), and lust (*vs. 14*), and discover that they have become oppressors (*vss. 16, 22, 23*). Solomon calls upon the reader to become wise by listening (*vss. 17, 18*), trusting God (*vs. 19*), seeking knowledge and truth (*vss. 20, 21*), and working hard (*vs. 29*). They are to avoid becoming like those who, as a result of hating wisdom, seek out the company of rich and powerful friends who have no judgment (*vss. 22–28*).

Consider This: Why do so many rich and famous people show little interest in God? Why did God endow humans with minds that have greater intellectual and spiritual capabilities than any other animals?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: In our materialistic and narcissistic world, it is easy to envy and emulate people who have money and power. Help your class to appreciate the surpassing worth of spiritual riches, such as good judgment and mercy.

Application Questions:

- ❶ How can we make sure that wisdom and judgment are priorities in our lives?
- ❷ Read Philippians 3:4–11. Why did Paul find it impossible to hold on to social status and to Christ at the same time?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Help your class see how accurately Proverbs 20–22 describes our situation today. Explain how these chapters offer secrets on how to escape from the pressures of pursuing earthly riches and success and to find peace and quiet in Christ, the wisdom of God (*1 Cor. 1:24*).

Activities:

- ❶ Ask your class members to list the priorities that are important to them right now. Ask them to explain what values they have used to devise the list.
- ❷ Read the chapter “The Reward of Service” in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, pp. 305–312, and discuss how Ellen G. White’s concept of spiritual reward compares with the concept of reward found in Proverbs 22.