

Sermon Summary #1

Proverbs, and the Perverse Power of Peer Pressure Proverbs 1:8-19

This inaugural message on the book of Proverbs is going to be somewhat odd, insofar as I am going to provide a short introduction to the book as a whole while also addressing what it says about how to overcome the power of peer pressure.

What is Proverbs?

Unlike the letters of the NT, such as Romans, *there is no sustained argument in the book of Proverbs, nor is there much of a logical structure in any particular paragraph*. Rather, the book of Proverbs is largely *a collection of separate, isolated, self-contained observations on reality which tell us how best to cope*. They are units of thought unto themselves and could conceivably be placed in any order.

As far as the nature of these self-contained units is concerned, they are best described as *pithy sayings* (defined by Webster's as "having substance and point; tersely cogent). I.e., they are simple illustrations which expose and expound upon fundamental realities of life. Someone once referred to them as *compressed experience*. They are not unlike our many English proverbs, such as

"A rolling stone gathers no moss"
"Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater"
"A penny saved is a penny earned"
"You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink"
"None is so blind as he who will not see", etc.

The book of Proverbs is also *universal* in spirit. Nowhere is "Israel" mentioned and there are only scattered references to the OT Levitical system. It is not historically grounded and allusions to actual events in redemptive history are minimal. In other words, it is *trans-cultural*. Its principles are timeless and therefore applicable and relevant to all people in every age. Hassel Bullock has pointed out that "fundamental to the proverbial form is the fact that it bears a truth that has been tested by time. Fads have no place in proverbial literature, except as their shallow nature may need to be exposed" (156).

Related to this is the fact that these proverbs give expression to *general maxims* concerning life. There will often be exceptions to the stated principle. For example, we say, "Like father, like son." But on occasion we find a son who not only does not look like his father but does not act like him either. But this doesn't invalidate the general rule or prove the proverb wrong. The exceptional, unusual and unprecedented are beyond the range of proverbial wisdom.

People have often objected to proverbs because they seem to make life too tidy. They are accused of reducing life to simplistic rules that eliminate mystery. But that is to misunderstand the nature of the proverb. The proverbs are designed to *identify and name the underlying patterns and principles which abide more or less constant in the flux of human living*. Again, for example, we say "Many hands make light work." There is much truth in this proverbial statement, but it is also true that "Too many cooks spoil the broth."

Even in the book of Proverbs we see what appears to be contradictory counsel. On the one hand we read, "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself" (26:4). But in the very next verse we read, "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes" (26:5). Or again, "Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed" (15:22). Yet in 19:21 we read, "Many are the plans in the mind of man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand."

Frequently the Proverbs will extol the merits and the reward that come from diligence, honesty, and hard work, as well as the dangers and ultimate disaster that sloth and injustice bring. But the fact is, experience occasionally sees these reversed. Therefore, **we must distinguish between a proverb and a promise or law. Proverbs are not inflexible laws built into God's creation, admitting of no exceptions. Neither are they promises which bind God unconditionally to always fulfill what the proverb says is true.** Christians have become discouraged when they "claim God's promises" by holding up to him some proverbial saying, only then to experience the unusual or exceptional. They conclude that either God let them down or that Scripture is not reliable.

The issues of *who* wrote the Proverbs and *how* the book is structured are inextricably tied up with each other. For example, the title in 1:1 is misleading, for it appears to indicate that Solomon is responsible for the entire book. But editorial comments elsewhere in the book demand otherwise. Hence the title of 1:1 is not a claim for sole authorship. It is best taken as meaning *primary contributor or inspirational genius* or some such notion.

In point of fact, the book is a compilation of wisdom sayings authored by several different people, some of whom are anonymous. The book was edited by certain individuals during Hezekiah's reign (715 to 686 b.c.), some 250 years after Solomon. Therefore, we must keep distinct in our minds the date of *authorship*, on the one hand, and the date of *final editing*, on the other. The former refers to when the material was first written, whereas the latter looks to the time when the anthology of sayings took on its completed, canonical form.

As to the structure of the book, the following is how most break it down:

- (1) A Father's Praise of Wisdom - 1:8-9:18 (the urgency of obtaining wisdom is set forth in the form of a father exhorting his son; see 1:8; 2:1-2; 3:1,13; 4:1; 5:1; etc.)
- (2) The Proverbs of Solomon (approximately 375 of them; according to 1 Kings 4:32, Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs!) - 10:1-22:16 (here we see a shift from urgent exhortation to short, pithy sayings of practical counsel)
- (3) The Proverbs of the Wise Men (of which there are two collections back to back) - 22:17-24:22; and 24:23-34
- (4) More Proverbs of Solomon: Hezekiah's Collection - 25:1-29:27
- (5) The Words of Agur - 30:1-33
- (6) The Words of Lemuel - 31:1-9
- (7) The Woman of Excellence - 31:10-31

The Purpose of Proverbs

The purpose of the book of Proverbs is summarized in chapter one, verses 2-5. Clearly the focus of the book is both *mental and moral*. Whatever instruction in truth is provided is not designed to fuel theological speculation but to prepare us for life, for navigating our way in, through, and around the many ethical decisions we must face and relational dynamics encountered on a daily basis.

In other words, Proverbs isn't philosophical but practical. *It's not about why we live but how*. It doesn't address the deeply theological issue of what is the meaning of life but rather how might I live a profitable and spiritually productive life. But make no mistake. Although practical, Proverbs is not simplistic. *This isn't a Christianized version of your standard fortune cookie*. And the wisdom we'll find here is a matter of life and death: "The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death" (13:14).

My friend Ray Ortlund, in his commentary on Proverbs, reminds us that *"God's grace is smart grace"* (18). What he means by that isn't that studying Proverbs makes you intellectually superior to others, but that it makes you more adept at recognizing and working your way through and around the land mines of the enemy; it makes you more

discerning in seeing through gray issues to the core truth of how to live; it gives you insight into human nature and how to most effectively respond when circumstances threaten to suffocate your life.

What, then, is “wisdom”? It is “more than brains. It is more than morals. We could memorize the whole Bible, and mean it from the heart, without wisdom. **Wisdom is skill, expertise, competence that understands how life really works, [and] how to achieve successful and even beautiful results**” (Ortlund, 28).

The Perverse Power of Peer Pressure

I struggle to think of a power and influence more pervasive and dangerous to our spiritual and physical welfare than that which comes from one’s peers to conform. Let me give you one illustration.

A number of years ago I read an article in *The Dallas Morning News* about the tragic death of Bridgett Bitler, a petite, blond 8th-grader who was upset that her family had moved from Allentown, PA, to East Greenville. Although some thought she had adjusted well, her classmates said she was threatening to kill herself. On a Monday, at around 6 p.m., Bridgett’s mother came home and found her daughter on the floor of the bathroom. She had taken her stepfather’s 22 caliber pistol and put a bullet through her head. She lingered for two days and died on a Wednesday. Police found a note beside her body. It read as follows: “I shot myself at 5:01 p.m. Do not blame Jim [the stepfather] ‘cause he had guns in the house. I love you Mom. P. S. *Everyone at this school hates me.*”

How powerful and influential and life-shaping is the desire of young people to be liked and accepted and included by their peers? Bridgett Bitler’s tragic death is but one shocking answer to that question.

So let’s look briefly at vv. 8-19 and note five principles.

First, vv. 8-9 make clear that the most important and influential source for good in a young person’s life is his parents, his family. Notice that *both the father and mother are involved*: “Son/Daughter, I need to talk to you about what the world is like. Here is what you can expect.” What I like about this counsel is that the parents don’t merely shout “No!” They do more than issue a warning. *They make a promise of great reward*: “a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck” (v. 9). In other words, just as a garland on the head or a glittering necklace beautifies one’s physical appearance, so the loving and wise counsel of parents will strengthen and beautify your moral character, if you heed it.

Second, peer pressure is especially powerful because it comes from more than one: “sinners” is plural. One person is easier to resist than five. Sin always recruits. Sin always loves company. Look especially at v. 14 where this gang promises camaraderie and unity and trust: “Join us. Share and share alike!” Parents, don’t ever lose sight of the inner desire of every child to belong. The yearning for community is powerful. No one can escape it. But a community of hardened and calloused sinners who invite you into their fold is hardly the sort of community that you should embrace.

Third, in vv. 11-14 we are given a snapshot into the criminal mind. The allure of a “get-rich-quick” scheme is deeply enticing. The prospect of big money painlessly acquired is a powerful incentive. By the way, the word translated “entice” in v. 10 is the verb form of the noun “simple” in v. 4. It literally means someone who is naïve and thus open to ludicrous suggestions; someone who is gullible and easily led astray. Simply put: “Don’t be so foolish as to be fooled!” What they make so appealing will destroy you!

Fourth, the reasons for refusing to join them are set forth in vv. 15-18. There are two of them: such people are evil and they are stupid! As for their stupidity, look at vv. 17-18. His point is that even birds are smart enough to see the hunter’s net and thus refuse to go for the bait. But these people aren’t nearly as sharp: the consequences of their greed is like a net clearly in front of their eyes but their greed overwhelms their discernment and they rush headlong into destruction.

Fifth, we see the final moral of the story in v. 19. To be “greedy for unjust gain” ultimately “takes away the life of its possessors” (v. 19). By “unjust gain” we are to understand that more than financial profit is in view. This could as easily apply to:

the politician who compromises his integrity and ignores the mandate of the voters to pass legislation that benefits him personally
the ambitious co-worker whose zeal for status in the office blinds him/her to right and wrong
the bully at school who tramples upon and teases the weaker child supposedly to enhance his own reputation
the racist who thinks that they move up by putting down people of a different color.

Overcoming the Perverse Power of Peer Pressure

But our task is only half completed. It is one thing to speak the truth to our children and even to adults regarding the insidious power of peer pressure. It is one thing to point out the devastating consequences should someone yield to it. But we need to dig deeper and get beneath the surface of the human soul to find out ***why such pressure is so appealing***.

The fundamental yearning or desire of the human heart is to be accepted and approved and applauded by others. Conversely, ***we live in paralyzing fear of rejection and scorn***. The person who yields to the enticement to join the gang is convinced that they will reject him/her if he/she does not meet the qualifications that they think are important. Therefore, in order to compensate for what he lacks he conforms to their ethics, their values. So how can we help someone who has fallen victim to this way of thinking?

We must remember that ***a person's self-image, that is to say, their satisfaction with themselves as individuals, varies in direct proportion to the realization of their greatest goals and values***. So, if I value physical beauty, but instead see homeliness or ugliness, I will feel badly about myself. If I value courage but act like a coward, I will feel guilty and unhappy with myself. If I value diligence and hard work but yield to the temptation to be lazy, I will feel self-hatred and contempt. The point is that your self-image will depend on the degree to which you attain what you value and cherish most.

If Susan is socially awkward and seems always to say the wrong thing and typically offends people, she is likely to feel guilty and despise herself and thus is extremely vulnerable to whatever group or behavior will bring acceptance and approval. Or if Philip is short, overweight, and clumsy, he will curse himself everytime he steps in front of a mirror. He's likely to withdraw and avoid contact with people and lose all motivation to pursue healthy relationships. Or if Mike was constantly berated by his father because the best grade point average he could muster in high school was C-, he's likely to become depressed and to conclude he's a worthless human being.

These people are sitting ducks for the temptation to join whatever evil crowd or indulge in whatever sinful behavior promises them acceptance and love and value. So they come to you for help and advice. What do you say?

Often people will say, "Susan, honey, you're not socially awkward and I've never heard you put your foot in your mouth. I think you're blowing this way out of proportion. People really do enjoy being around you." Or they say, "Philip, you are not really *that* short or *that* overweight." Or they say, "Mike, a C- average is better than D. And your dad has always been an ungrateful jerk anyway. Ignore him."

May I suggest that a more biblical approach will be to help Susan, Philip, and Mike recognize that they've bought into a lie concerning what is of greatest value and what brings genuine and lasting purpose in life. In other words, I would try to persuade them that ***their treasure is misplaced***. I would try to persuade them that they were created to treasure and enjoy something *greater* than outward appearance, something greater than social sophistication, something more important than a high grade point average. It probably won't help much in the long run to tell Susan she's as appealing as a Hollywood actress or Philip that there are a lot of short overweight men in the world or Mike that a C- average is at least a passing grade and who knows how many successful CEO's of Fortune 500 companies did even worse than that in school!

Instead I would labor with God's help and under the authority of Scripture to persuade them to ***embrace a new and different hierarchy of values***. I would want to convince my children, for example, that what gives them value is that they are created in God's image. I would want them to see that what matters most is that they are known and loved by Christ and have been adopted into God's family and are destined for eternal glory.

This is what happened when the apostle Paul was converted to faith in Christ. This is what he meant when he compiled all his earthly and ethnic and educational accomplishments and declared: All these things are dung compared with the surpassing excellency of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord (Phil. 3:7-8)!

Our goal must be to build biblical values into our children and to help adults see that what they cherish most but have failed to attain is misguided and warped. What they need most is for the Holy Spirit, through the truths of God's Word, to *supernaturally transform their value system and to enable them to cherish and relish what is of paramount and eternal importance, namely, knowing and being known by Christ, loving and being loved by Christ!*

If, in the process, the self-image of Susan and Philip and Mike is changed for the better, wonderful. But make sure it is changed because they now see themselves as God sees them and they now value Christ and their relationship with him more than any relationship or approval that the "gang" offers them.

The failure largely lies with parents. It starts in the home. Let's be honest. Far too many of us have raised our children to believe that all those things the world says are important really are, when in fact they are not. We have raised them thinking that if you are beautiful, brainy, or brawny you are of great worth. But woe betide the homely, C student who can't walk and chew gum at the same time. Part of the reason, then, why our kids buy into what the world values most is because **we** do.

Although it was many years ago, I will never forget the horrific murder of eight student nurses in Chicago by a psychopath named Richard Speck. The day after this was discovered a radio commentator was discussing the tragedy and said this: "The thing that makes this tragedy much worse is that all eight of these girls were so attractive."

What? Why does their physical appearance make this tragedy "much worse"? Would it have been any less evil and heinous if they had been plain or homely?

But that is how the world thinks, and we must labor diligently to make sure we don't buy into its lies and don't inculcate in our children such unbiblical nonsense.

So let me close with a brief summary of some practical steps we need to take as parents in order to prepare our kids for their encounter with the pressure of their peers.

First, as already noted, the single most important thing you can do is to build into your children biblical values of what is of greatest worth. If they grow up convinced that physical beauty is more important than moral integrity or that athletic achievement is of greater value than knowing Christ or that financial gain is to be prized above spiritual maturity, they will succumb to the temptations of the world. They will have no reason or power or incentive to say No to the pressure of their peers to conform.

Second, put an end to all comparisons. Stop finally and forever the horrid habit of comparing your kids with others and belittling them for failing to measure up.

Third, one reason teenagers so readily seek acceptance at any cost from their peers is because they can't find acceptance at home. What they don't get from you they will seek from others. If they never seem to be able to live up to *your* expectations, they will find someone else where they can.

Fourth, it's one thing to instruct them in the consequences of saying Yes to the enticement of the gang or the demands of their friends to join in some sinful, and perhaps even, criminal behavior; it's another thing to let them suffer those consequences. Too often parents are over protective, always bailing out their children before they ever learn what being responsible is, before they ever have the opportunity to learn from the pain of punishment that their choices might bring.

Fifth, most times your children will yield to the pressure of *their* peers in proportion to how much you yield to the pressure of *yours*. Do they see in you a resistance to conform or compromise? Don't lead merely with your words. Lead with your lives.