

Life Learning
June 10, 2018

We live in a confusing world. There are so many ways to live now that it is harder than ever to succeed at life. There are diverse morals, lifestyles, values, religions, political ideals, philosophies, and worldviews competing for our attention and allegiance. It makes it harder to figure out the best way to live.

Life situations differ, but people are much the same everywhere. And people everywhere are looking for help to make good decisions so they will succeed at life.

The internet is full of advice. The other day, as an experiment, I did a search for "7 steps to". I got a very diverse list of articles pop up. Many people had written a "7 steps to" article on some subject. They ran the gamut from psychological help, relationships help, hobbies, medical issues, business helps, and many more. And if you change the search parameter to "one step" or "two steps", etc., you still get lots of advice.

So where can we turn for really good advice? Well one source is a book in the Bible. I'm not just talking about success with God, but all kinds of success, like financial success and relationships.

When we introduce the Bible to someone, one of the things we teach is that the Bible is made up of different kinds of literature. There is history, biography, law, prophecy, and poetry. The poetry category consists of five books, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. But in Judaism three of these books are known as wisdom literature. **The Wisdom Literature of the Bible includes Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.**

This morning I want to introduce you to the book of Proverbs. When Solomon was king of Israel, the country was at peace with all of the surrounding nations. King David, Solomon's father, had defeated all those nations and they were now paying taxes to Israel. Under Solomon, the nation was growing richer by the day. Things were good, really good. So Solomon had lots of money and lots of time on his hands. He dabbled in architecture and building projects, in gardening, and in the study of life. He made it a practice to observe people, their attitudes and actions and the long-term results of these. And he wrote down the results of what he observed so he could pass it on to his son who would be the next king. He addresses his son in the book.

Proverbs 1:8 (NIV) Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching.

In the first chapters Solomon urges his son to seek a life of wisdom and to guard against some of the biggest mistakes he would be tempted to make. Then he moves into the proverbs.

There is much here to teach us all how to succeed in life. The advice in this book is not just for the young, like high school graduates, but for anyone who wants to improve his or her life, anyone who wants a better relationship with God, anyone who wants to better succeed at human relationships, anyone who wants to prosper in life. There is important instruction for us all in the book of Proverbs.

So what is a proverb? Timothy Keller puts forth a good definition. **"A proverb is a poetic, vivid, terse, thought-provoking saying that conveys a world of truth in a few words."**
(Timothy Keller, God's Wisdom for Navigating Life, page 1)

Note the phrase "thought-provoking."

To benefit from a proverb you have to think about it.

This is what we try to do with our church sign. We put short proverbs on the church sign. Some of the things we put on our sign are meant to make people laugh. Others are meant to get people to pray. But with all of them we want people to think. The biggest goal is that we want people to think about God and their relationship to Him. Proverbs are written to make you think. There is no benefit from them unless you do so. Solomon wants his son to think and become wise and to live that wisdom, to succeed at life.

As you read, you will see that Solomon writes of two different kinds of people. It is not religious and non-religious. It is not Jew and non-Jew. Solomon's proverbs speak of the wise person and the foolish person. The wise person wants to become wiser. He or she will take the time to think on a proverb and learn more from it than it shows at face value.

The fool reads a proverb and dismisses it as unimportant. He doesn't give it any attention. The fool is not interested in learning about success, but assumes she already knows all she needs to know. And yet, Solomon points out that the fool usually fails to succeed in life. We all need wisdom to succeed.

These proverbs are general observations about life most anywhere in any culture. They very much reflect what all people are like. Any person, even a non-religious person, can gain wisdom by reading, thinking about, and applying many of these proverbs to his or her life.

There is one more thing I need to say and that you need to hear. **The proverbs are not promises or commands from God.** Many people mistakenly read the proverbs as one or the other. When a proverb states a given outcome, that is not a promise from God that it will always happen. It is simply Solomon's observation of what usually happens. So don't get upset when you experience an exception to what usually happens. Don't lose your faith in God or His word.

Now, with that introduction, let's read Solomon's introduction.

Proverbs 1:1-6 (NIV) The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young-- let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance-- for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.

Solomon gives us 5 reasons you should read this book.

1) ...for attaining wisdom and discipline (instruction)

Wisdom is not for the intellectual, the great thinker, alone. Wisdom is for everyone. Wisdom is the knowledge of how to live your life, your everyday life. Wisdom is for knowing what to do in any of the common situations and decisions we all face everyday. Wisdom is for making good choices.

Some choices are spelled out for you by others, a parent, a teacher, or a boss. For example, the teacher says to do the math on page 27 for homework. You can choose to do that page or another page or no page. Wisdom says to do the assigned page and avoid the penalties for failure to do so. Some choices are determined for us by others.

Other choices are taught to us as things either right or wrong. These involve moral choices. We are taught not to hit each other, not to steal from each other, etc. Wisdom teaches us to avoid the penalties of doing failing in moral choices.

But there are lots of other choices that no one instructs us on. There are no instructions of what to do or not do in many other choices available to us. You get up each day and decide what your attitude will be, what to wear, what to eat, how to respond to others, whether to be grumpy or cheerful. You decide. No one else decides these for you. And all of them have consequences. So, if you want to succeed in life, you need wisdom for making good decisions in all of these things.

The words discipline and instruction may not sound close in meaning to you. But this is discipline in the sense of training. The point Solomon is making is that... **We need to learn how to learn from our mistakes.** His proverbs are going to give us the kind of help to avoid some mistakes and learn the lessons of them.

2) ... for understanding words of insight

Wisdom does you no good if you don't know how to use it. Insight means knowing how to use the wisdom you gain. You can memorize a proverb. But if you don't know what it means or how to apply it, you lack insight.

For example, knowing that "**A stitch in time saves nine**" does you no good if you don't know what a stitch is or what it applies to.

3) ... for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,

He modifies that phrase by saying "doing what is right and just and fair".

Here is moral teaching. Remember, this was written from a father to his son. It covers many different topics. And there is moral teaching in here as well as non-moral wisdom instruction.

4) ...for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young

The idea here is skill at applying wisdom. Skill at anything comes from experience.

Notice the terms "the simple" and "the young." Don't take the word simple in the wrong way. He is not speaking about those who are mentally deficient. Other translations read "the naive" or "the inexperienced." The chief characteristic here is inexperience. Solomon hopes to teach his inexperienced son things that Solomon learned through his own experience. Then his son can test them out and see if what dad says is true. Some things you can only learn by personal experience. But it helps to use someone else's experience as a guide. This is what Solomon is providing.

5) ...for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.

This seems like nonsense. How can reading proverbs help me understand proverbs? They do so by requiring you to think. To understand what Solomon wants to teach his son will require us to think about the proverbs. We have to learn how to think, to ponder something, to work out the questions it raises. Remember, proverbs are thought-provoking. It is in

thinking about them and their application that we will gain the wisdom to understand other proverbs and such.

So in the first six verse, Solomon has introduced his book to his son and to us. He then addresses his son in verse 8. But in the middle, between 6 and 8 he gives a foundational statement about wisdom. This sets the tone for the whole book.

Proverbs 1:7 (NIV) The fear of the LORD (Yahweh) is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

The Book of Proverbs stresses wise living. This is synonymous with godly living. Godly living means to be constantly looking to God to know how He wants us to live. In that is great wisdom. Pursuing a right relationship with God is the wisest step to take to succeed at life. This is emphasized several times in his book.

Proverbs 2:6 (NIV) For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

There is a lot of advice on the internet. Not all of it is trustworthy. The advice of your friends may or may not be trustworthy. The advice of God, through Solomon, is the most trustworthy advice you will ever hear or read. God wants you to succeed and gives us the help to do so. Seek what God has for you. Put your faith, your trust, in Him.

Proverbs 3:5-6 (NIV) Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and He will make your paths straight.

The ultimate source of the wisdom to succeed in life comes from God. If you can maintain your relationship to God, He will bring you to success.

The key here is to seek God with humility.

Note the phrase "lean not on your own understanding". This is echoed in the next verse.

Proverbs 3:7 (NIV) Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.

Both of these phrases, "Lean not on your own understanding" and "Do not be wise in your own eyes" mean to humble yourself. Admit to yourself and God that despite all that you HAVE learned in wise living, it is not wise to try to go it alone, without God. No matter how successful you become, don't lose this attitude of humility, or you may very well fail in your success.

Timothy Keller well illustrates this. Rev. Keller has ministered to young professionals in New York City for the last 20 years. He has seen in their lives what leads to success and why so many fail once they achieve some success. In a recent interview with LifeWay he said, "In general, success makes you stupid. It does not make you wise, it makes you foolish. Because what happens is the heart is sinful. When you are successful, the human heart always takes more credit for success than it ought to,... always. Our heart is self-justifying. So what happens is, you get successful and you say, 'I did that, I was smart enough, I did the research, I knew what to do,' and actually, it was a gift, a gift from God... and you take credit for it. And you become less self aware. You don't see your limitations. You become over

confident, and according to the book of Proverbs: 'Being wise in your own eyes is the heart of being a fool,' because it sets you up to make very bad decisions,... bad decisions about who to marry, how to raise your children, how to make other business deals. Now they trust their gut" instead of looking to and trusting God.... Generally, success makes me stupid and failures and disappointments make me wiser." - Tim Keller
<https://factsandtrends.net/2018/05/16/tim-keller-qa-wisdom-for-modern-ministry/>

No matter how successful you become, don't lose this attitude of humility. Keep humbling your heart, no matter how successful you are in the eyes of others. Take their praise with a grain of salt and don't let it go to your head. Know in your heart that it is God who has provided your success. Stay humble and thankful.

Invitation:

The start of becoming a Christian is humility before God. It is admitting to ourselves and God that we are sinners, hopeless sinners, sinners who have no chance of heaven without a Savior, someone to save us from the penalty of our own sins.

Today, can you admit your sin and your need for a Savior, Jesus?

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Prayer: I want to honor You with my life. Teach me, Lord, how to succeed at living the life You have planned for me.

Prayer: Lord, I want to be successful, but for many wrong reasons. Do everything necessary, even bringing into my life humbling and disappointments that will teach me to care more about being faithful than being successful.