Principles for Interpreting Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is designed to explain truth so that its readers can learn how to live successfully before God in a treacherous world (Prov 1:1–7). Nonetheless, for contemporary readers far removed from Solomon’s time and culture, understanding and applying the book’s contents can prove challenging. The following eight principles will help overcome this challenge:

1. **Interpret each proverb dependent on God’s assistance.** To interpret the contents of Proverbs without unreserved reliance upon God would run against the very motto of the book (“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,” Prov 1:7) and its own explicit instructions for growing in wisdom (“Trust the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding,” 3:5). As with all parts of Scripture, the contents of Proverbs are inspired, authoritative, and necessary for salvation and growth in godliness (2 Tim 3:15–17). They must be interpreted with continual prayer and dependency. Resist the temptation to lean on your own intuition as the basis for understanding.

2. **Give attention to a proverb’s literary context.** A proverb is a concise, stand-alone statement crafted to provoke contemplation and to be recalled in the moment of need. Nonetheless, each proverb is still to be read in its broader literary context. They are to be read as a collection. The contents of Proverbs were deliberately collected to form an “instruction manual” that would bring these sayings into one source for referencing and comparison. This book context is vital to remember. Therefore: (a) check first to see if the proverb is found in a larger set of proverbs that are to be read together as a unit; (b) compare the proverb with other proverbs on the same theme found elsewhere in the book; (c) consider the proverb in light of the book’s motto (the “fear of the LORD,” Prov 1:7); (d) consider the proverb in light of Solomon’s testimony (see especially 1 Kings 1–11 and Ecclesiastes); and finally, (d) consider whether other Scriptures explain or refine how the truth of the proverb is to be applied to daily life.

Consequently, while proverbs are intended to be memorized, memorization of the proverbs in isolation is not enough. One favorite proverb on an issue cannot be mechanically applied to all situations dealing with that issue. What a proverb contributes to our understanding of an issue must be connected with what other proverbs contribute to that same issue. As Fee and Stuart state, “An appreciation of the full contexts of the individual proverbs will help to interpret and apply them well” (How to Read the Bible, 246). Thus, becoming acquainted with the whole book through a systematic reading plan is essential.

3. **Consider the proverb’s historical and cultural context.** Solomon spoke his wisdom into a time and culture that was very different from ours. He incorporated analogies and word pictures which were common to his immediate audience, but far removed from our technological age. He speaks of mangers and oxen. The dogs of his day were wild scavengers, not household pets. He describes commerce in terms of scales and weights. For him, the roofs of houses were flat, and the highest human authority in the land was a king. The reader must not only study the language of each proverb but the historical context in which they were given. If not, grave mistakes are inevitable in understanding and application.

4. **Contemplate each proverb’s revelatory context.** Proverbs provide observations on two sources of revelation: (a) general revelation—the testimony of God universally evident in creation; and (b) special revelation—the testimony of God revealed in the verbal revelation recorded prior to Solomon—particularly the Mosaic Law (Prov 6:23).
With respect to general revelation, the proverbs show that creation itself communicates wisdom. Life principles can be drawn from ants, badgers, locusts, and lizards (Prov 30:24–28). The seasons themselves teach that the time of sowing must precede the time of reaping—that enjoying the reward must come after working hard. All the analogies and word-pictures drawn from the natural world prove that there is a moral order evident in creation that points to God and displays His moral character, wisdom, and power (cf. Rom 1:18–20). The reader of Proverbs must take the time to trace this line of reasoning.

With respect to special revelation, the proverbs provide observations on how the Mosaic Law applies to everyday life. This is seen most directly in the references to God. Over eighty times in Proverbs He is referred to by His personal name Yahweh (“LORD”—a name that has unmistakable connections to His covenants with Israel (cf. Exod 20:1–2). With that in mind, it is fascinating to consider how the proverbs skillfully exposit the Ten Commandments that stand as the constitution for the nation of Israel (cf. Exod 20:3–17), whether this pertains to fearing God (the first three commandments), listening to a father’s counsel (the fifth commandment), resisting anger (the sixth commandment), maintaining sexual purity (the seventh commandment), working hard (the eighth commandment), speaking truth (the ninth commandment), or acting justly (the tenth commandment). Speaking of Proverbs’ relationship to the Mosaic Law, Long writes, “To listen to a proverb without at the same time hearing its covenantal background is to pry a gem from its setting” (Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible, 58–59). A solid understanding of the Mosaic Law is therefore crucial for a deep understanding and application of the book.

5. Take into account each proverb’s internal structure. The proverbs use different literary forms and word-pictures to teach truth. Their figurative language helps make the truths they communicate both memorable and forceful. There are two basic literary forms evident in the book: (a) wisdom admonishments, which contain extended instruction in the form of commands (found primarily in Prov 1–9); and (b) wisdom sayings, which contain observations based on experience and are generally expressed in a two-part sentence (found primarily in Prov 10–29).

The wisdom sayings are generally stated in four kinds of parallel statements: (i) synonymous parallelism, where the lines of the proverb communicate the same idea with different language (e.g., 16:18); (ii) antithetic parallelism, where the lines of the proverb communicate a contrast that demonstrates the black-and-white world of biblical wisdom (e.g., 10:12); (iii) emblematic parallelism, where both lines of the proverb communicate the same idea, but one line is figurative and the other is literal (e.g., 25:14); and (iv) synthetic parallelism, a less direct form of parallelism where the second line advances the idea of the first line (e.g., 20:4). Each kind of parallelism has its own function and must be interpreted accordingly. For example, it would be wrong to emphasize a difference in meaning between synonyms in proverbs expressing synonymous parallelism, but in proverbs expressed in emblematic parallelism, the differences must be maintained. Overall, these variations in form keep the proverbs from becoming monotonous or predictable.

6. Do not treat a proverb as an exhaustive summation of reality. Although a biblical proverb is an inspired expression of truth (cf. 2 Tim 3:16), remember that it is expressing a part of that truth. It is one segment that points to the whole, not the whole itself. This is true because an important feature of a proverb is brevity. A proverb is what it is because it is short and sweet. This brevity does not allow the proverb to address all qualifications and exceptions. The “fine print” is left to other Scriptures to reveal. As Hildebrandt states, “It does not pretend to describe all of reality, just one segment of it” (“Proverb,” 248). Phillips writes, “A proverb is a saying, not a dissertation” (God’s Wisdom in Proverbs, 17). This is what leads to the necessity and benefit of thematic studies of Proverbs. As Steveson states, “The organized framework of a subject study reveals the full teaching of the book on a single subject. When we consider the individual proverbs, they give us single ideas, restricted in
scope. But when we systematically order the proverbs, they give a fuller teaching on the broad range of the subject” (*Proverbs*, xxiii–xxiv).

7. **Do not assume that a proverb is an absolute guarantee.** Because biblical proverbs are not intended to be exhaustive descriptions of truth, a single proverb cannot be taken automatically as an iron-clad, incontrovertible law. As Sproul states, “A common mistake in biblical interpretation and application is to give a proverbial saying the weight or force of a moral absolute” (*Knowing Scripture*, 99).

Certainly, the book of Proverbs does describe what typically occurs in God’s ordered, cause-and-effect universe so that the listener can expect to reap what he sows. Moreover, whenever individual proverbs testify to God’s character, they always speak with a guarantee (e.g., Prov 3:5–6; 11:1; 12:22; 15:3; 16:2, 33; 22:2). But when they observe the world—a world in which both curse and redemption operate—room must be allowed for exceptions.

For example, while the book of Proverbs generally attributes poverty to foolish decisions (e.g., 10:4; 20:13; 21:17), it also acknowledges that poverty itself is not necessarily the consequence of sin (e.g., 19:1). Moreover, while a man may have made many foolish decisions from childhood that propel him along the path of foolishness, God’s revelation and grace can always change the fool’s direction. Consequently, before claiming a promise from a proverb it is imperative to survey all of the proverbs that deal with that same issue to see where exceptions may exist. As Parsons states, “the proverbs tell us what generally takes place without making an irreversible rule that fits all circumstances” (“Guidelines for Understanding and Preaching Proverbs,” 158).

8. **Recognize that some proverbs look at life as it is, not as it should be.** Connected to the book’s emphasis on practical living, the book will sometimes draw observations about the way things work in a sin-stained world, without stating how things should actually work in light of God’s revelation. A prime example of this is the book’s teaching on gifts to those in authority. While bribes are condemned when they pervert justice (Prov 17:23; 29:4), they are described as helpful when used by one who appeals to someone in authority with a request (17:4). The mere description of such realities should not be taken as a blanket endorsement.

The book of Proverbs is best read slowly. Read as little as one complete proverb a day, or as much as a whole chapter per day and so get through the entire book in one month. But read consistently, and with a view to developing a familiarity with the entire book.