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Unit 1

The Virtues of Wisdom



Why Christian Ethics?

1

*There is a way which seemeth right unto a man
but the end thereof are the ways of death.*

—Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25

As a school without a teacher, a ship without a captain, a train without an engineer, a plane without a pilot, a child without a parent, so is our world without God and His definition and direction of right and wrong.

Imagine you are attending a new school starting this week. The first day the teacher says, “Now, students, you know every school has rules, and the word of the teacher is authoritative and unquestionable. You know it is your duty to obey.”

You sigh under your breath. *Why don't you tell us something new?*

The teacher continues with a smile. “However, we are going to run this school differently. Instead of having classes, assignments, and tests at my appointed times, I am leaving it all up to you. You know your subjects and the requirements for passing. I respect you and your decisions. You are all old enough to take care of yourselves.”

“Wow!” you whistle to yourself. “What a break! The teacher is going to let us run the school.”

“Now let’s get to work,” the teacher is saying. “You may work on any subject you choose.”

“I don’t like social studies or science, so I’ll leave those subjects until last,” you tell yourself as you get out your math book.

“Oh, no.” You groan. “Why does the first lesson have to include so much geometry? I’ll have to ask for help.”

You raise your hand for help, but the teacher smiles and waves. “Don’t bother waving your hand in the air, just come here,” he tells

you. With raised eyebrows and a look of amazement, you go to the teacher and ask for help.

“You just do it whichever way you think best. I trust and respect your decision,” the teacher says.

“But surely there is a right and a wrong way to do it. I plain don’t know how to do it!” you blurt out.

“That’s all right. You’ll find a way,” the teacher replies.

You go back to your desk, stuff the math book back in, and take out language. You do three pages without any trouble besides the distraction of noisy students around you. Now you face another decision. The book says, “Write an eight-hundred-word essay on one of the subjects below.” Essays! You hate them! And so many words—impossible! You’d better find out if the teacher expects you to do everything in the book.

You go to the teacher’s desk this time without raising your hand. The desk is surrounded with students asking how to do this or that. Always the teacher answers, “Do what you think is best. I trust your judgment. I respect your decision.” Then follow groans or cheers, depending on the question asked.

You are sure you have a question that requires a definite yes or no answer. But you are wrong!

“Just do as you like about essays,” the teacher replies. “I trust your decision.”

Well, that’s great! you say to yourself. *I don’t like to write essays, so I won’t.*

The grading period continues. Everyone does his work according to his own wishes. Each student decides when and how to take his tests, and then the teacher files them away.

Then suddenly you panic. Tomorrow is report card day! You have completed three lessons in social studies and one in science. You lost your vocabulary book after the first week of school, so that work is incomplete. You skipped the first ten lessons in math because of the introduction to geometry. Then you learned that your best friend would give you the answers in math if you would do his language. Not a bad deal. The teacher had said you would find a way to get the

answers, and you had. But still you have some fears. Tomorrow will be the day of reckoning, and you did not do your best. You know that if your report card is honest, you will not make the grade.

You would not enjoy attending such a school. We all know a school cannot operate smoothly or profitably without a teacher's authority and direction and students' cooperation. Life is that way too. Without rules and guidance, we do not know which way or how to go—and our own direction is never trustworthy.

Yet, you live in a world where many people attempt to operate on much the same basis as this hypothetical school. Our world is expressing more and more opposition to authority and direction. The “new” ethics of our time says anything goes.

Situational ethics is one example. Situational ethics says there is no absolute right and wrong behavior; what is right or wrong depends upon the situation. Thus, a person who follows situational ethics ultimately makes his own decisions and follows his own judgment based on how he perceives the situation. He does not let others tell him what is right to do or not to do, but does whatever seems best to him in the situation.

God does not operate this way. Proverbs 3:7 tells us, “Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil.” Our own judgment without God's guidance is never trustworthy. The Bible tells us it is not. “It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps” (Jeremiah 10:23).

Another example of today's ethics is *utilitarianism*. This is the idea that good is judged only by consequences. Therefore, if you think a commandment of God will produce good and happy consequences, you obey it. If you think obeying will bring disagreeable or unhappy consequences, then you do not obey it.

Utilitarianism assumes we can foresee the consequences of an act, which is clearly impossible. From God's Word we know that all of God's commands are for our good and that disobeying them always results in bad consequences. Although we do need to consider seriously the consequences of our actions, we do not limit our obedience to that which we fully understand.

Our understanding is finite; God's is infinite. To define right and wrong by our understanding of consequences is to assume we know as much as God. We do not. We need God to tell us in His Word what is right; then we must obey and trust the results to Him.

Many people, rather than taking directions from God's Word, are wise in their own eyes. Sure of their ability to cope, they experiment with drugs, alcohol, and immorality. "I can handle it. It isn't going to hurt me," they say. What are the results of such self-assured, self-sufficient attitudes? Too often they end up as addicts, alcoholics, and sex offenders.

When a person chooses to do something God says he is not to do, he is assuming he knows better than God does what is good for him. But as someone has said, "'Anything goes' results in disastrous blows." We will always reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7).

God has done His part in instructing how to live. In His Word, the Bible, He has given us a complete ethical standard of conduct. The Bible clearly presents principles of right and wrong and illustrates them for us in the life of Jesus. We call these principles Christian ethics. Because the Book of Proverbs so beautifully summarizes many of these principles, it is especially valuable in helping young people know how to live.

In the back of this book is a section entitled "Topical Proverbs." These are collections of verses from Proverbs related to various topics. Read these verses when suggested in the text.

Proverbs addresses a wide range of character traits that display God's ideals of ethical conduct. Proverbs also reveals the negative side of conduct that does not conform to Christian ethics. Proverbs provides a moral code by which you can live properly, lovingly, and happily with yourself, your family, your fellow men, and your God. You can discover in God's Word answers to every crucial issue you face. Many of those answers can be found in the Book of Proverbs. You will find that the ethics of this world and ethics of the Christian are a world apart.

Make it a practice to read and study the Book of Proverbs thoughtfully and prayerfully; it will change your life.

Introducing Proverbs

2

*But where shall wisdom be found?
and where is the place of understanding?
Man knoweth not the price thereof;
neither is it found in the land of the living.
The depth saith, It is not in me:
and the sea saith, It is not with me.
It cannot be gotten for gold,
neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof.
It cannot be valued with the gold of Ophir,
with the precious onyx, or the sapphire.
The gold and the crystal cannot equal it:
and the exchange of it shall not be for jewels of fine gold.
No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls:
for the price of wisdom is above rubies.*

—Job 28:12-18

This passage from the Book of Job resembles passages in Proverbs. Two other verses in Job 28 answer the questions these verses raise: “God understandeth the way thereof, and he knoweth the place thereof” (verse 23), and “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding” (verse 28).

Another partial answer to these questions could be “In the Book of Proverbs.”

Some people see the Book of Proverbs as a book of wise sayings to repeat and memorize. Some see it as a book of practical ethics.

Some have described it as truth for living, and one person called it the young man's best guidebook to success.

The Book of Proverbs is all this and more. It is full of wisdom, not only to repeat and memorize, but also to practice. As you study God's code of ethics in this book, you will find instruction on a wide range of subjects. Its practical guidance for everyday life will help you walk in the wisdom of God.

The Bible is composed of many types of literature. One type of Old Testament literature is sometimes called wisdom literature. Proverbs is one of the books of wisdom literature, along with Job and Ecclesiastes.

Solomon, a king of Israel and the wisest man ever (except Jesus), wrote most of Proverbs. Agur, Lemuel, and perhaps others also wrote a few of the chapters in Proverbs. We do not know who Agur and Lemuel were, but Proverbs 31:1 refers to Lemuel as a king.

Understanding the methodology of the writers helps us better understand their message from the Lord. The Hebrew word translated *proverb* is often understood to mean "comparison." Proverbs is a book of comparisons. It compares and contrasts wisdom to foolishness, slothfulness to diligence, anger to self-control, along with many other comparisons.

The Hebrew writers put this wisdom in a form of poetry known as parallelism. Parallelism does not use rhythm and rhyme; its poetic form is constructed from similar or opposing thoughts. Understanding three common types of parallelism will help you grasp the meaning of Hebrew proverbs.

In **synonymous parallelism**, the second line repeats the same idea as the first line, but in different words.

"A wise man is strong; yea, a man of knowledge increaseth strength" (Proverbs 24:5).

In **synthetic parallelism**, the second line is an extension of the first, completing the thought.

"Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace" (Proverbs 3:17).

Not only are wisdom's ways pleasant and good, but also her paths are peaceful.

Synthetic parallelism often uses a simile to extend the thought of the first line. A simile uses *like* or *as* to make comparisons.

“As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country” (Proverbs 25:25).

Here the writer compares the refreshment a thirsty person finds in a cold drink to the refreshment one receives by getting good news from someone far away.

In **antithetic parallelism**, the second line contrasts with the first one.

“The fear of the LORD prolongeth days: but the years of the wicked shall be shortened” (Proverbs 10:27).

Antithetic parallelism often uses the word *but*. The righteous are contrasted with the wicked, the rich with the poor, and so on. Often, if one part of an antithetic proverb doesn't seem to make sense, studying the contrasting part helps make its meaning clearer.

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of maxims and short pithy sayings (proverbs). Many everyday (non-biblical) proverbs are sayings handed down from one generation to another. The Book of Proverbs records observations regarding the cause and effects of sin, sorrow, and death. It discusses various virtues and vices, using God's wisdom as the reference point for right and wrong. Although Proverbs is for everyone, its frequent references to “my son” make it especially relevant to a young person who wants to find wisdom, grow in wisdom, and live by wisdom.

In Proverbs, wisdom is often personified—referred to as a person by the use of *she* or *her*. Wisdom is much more than just good judgment or knowledge. Wisdom will be a guide and protector of the one who chooses her as his own.

When we seek God, we find wisdom. But when a person becomes a child of God, he does not become wise all at once. James 1:5 says “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not.” This verse,

like many verses in Proverbs, tells us we must seek after wisdom if we would have it. The passage from Job at the beginning of this chapter describes wisdom as a precious treasure for which a person needs to search diligently.

If you sincerely desire to have God's wisdom in your life, read His Word daily. Ask God to supply you with wisdom to handle everything that comes into your life today—one day at a time.

This brief outline of Proverbs will help you distinguish its main sections.

Chapters 1-9: The blessing and principles of wisdom

Chapters 10-24: The central collection of Solomon

Chapters 25-29: Proverbs of Solomon copied by the men
of Hezekiah

Chapter 30: Words of Agur

Chapter 31: Words of Lemuel

Proverbs places family at the foundation of society and sets the standards of conduct for good citizens. It emphasizes individual responsibility and expresses God's ideals for how every person in every land should live.

As you study Proverbs, may you have a growing sense of the presence of God and a deepening personal relationship with Him. God is interested in *you*. His whole plan for your life is in His Book. May you come to know wisdom intimately as you walk in her pleasant ways and her paths of peace (Proverbs 3:17).