

Proverbs 22:17-23:11 “Thirty Sayings of the Wise, Part One: On Wealth” August 9, 2020

Introduction: The Thirty Sayings of the Wise

Over the next three weeks we will be looking at the thirty sayings of the wise.

Scholars have noticed a lot of parallels between this collection
and an Egyptian document, “Instruction of Amenemope” –
a wisdom book containing thirty sayings –
some of which have strong parallels here.

The Instruction of Amenemope was written some time around the Exodus,
or shortly thereafter –
but some time before the time of Solomon.

Since Solomon married a daughter of Pharaoh,
it would make sense that he would be familiar with the wisdom tradition of Egypt.

The thirty sayings of the wise here in chapters 22-24 have definite parallels to Egypt –
but also definite parallels to other wisdom traditions from Akkadia and Aram.

We shouldn’t be surprised to find the OT
engaging with Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom literature.
After all, Paul does exactly the same thing with Greek and Roman culture in the NT!

As I mentioned Thursday night,
I heard an interesting statement coming from the house next door.
A young man was trying to convince his aunt of something the Bible teaches.
She replied, “I don’t need the Bible to be a good person!”

I couldn’t quite hear his response –
but I’ve heard that sort of statement many times,
and it’s exactly right.

You don’t need the Bible to be a good person!
Ancient Egyptian wisdom literature will tell you how to be a good person.
Any philosophy – any religion – will tell you how to be a good person.

You don’t need the Bible for that!

You need the Bible because you are *not* a good person!
The unique message of the Bible is that there is a Redeemer –
that the God who made all things –
the God who created the rich and the poor alike –
he is the one who entered our miserable world
and he gave his own life as the sacrifice for our sin.

He bore our sin – our misery – our death –
and therefore the reason why you need the Bible
is because the Bible is one place where you find the way of salvation.

It is also true that the Bible is *useful* for showing you how to live a good life.

Given how important Egypt was (it had been the dominant power in the region
for centuries!),
it makes sense that Solomon’s court would pay attention to Egyptian texts.
In our passage for tonight there are lots of parallels to Amenemope.
But after the 11th saying, the other 19 sayings (through 24:22)
have no real connection to the Egyptian tradition.

And even from the start – in Saying One – it is clear that the LORD (Yahweh)
is at the heart of true wisdom.

1. Saying 1 – The Importance of Hearing (22:17-21)

¹⁷ *Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise,
and apply your heart to my knowledge,
¹⁸ for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you,
if all of them are ready on your lips.
¹⁹ That your trust may be in the LORD,
I have made them known to you today, even to you.
²⁰ Have I not written for you thirty sayings
of counsel and knowledge,
²¹ to make you know what is right and true,
that you may give a true answer to those who sent you?*

The opening saying sets up the whole
with a call to *hear* the words of the wise.
This is once again the voice of the Father speaking to the Son –
the voice of the wise teacher who now imparts wisdom to his student.

Who is the student?

It could be any number of possibilities.
The context of the 30 sayings suggests that they are written not so much for the king,
but for those who will spend their lives around the king –
the nobility and other important people in Jerusalem.

There is a very simple chiasm here – built around verse 19.
At the heart of this introduction is the call to *trust in the LORD*.

That your trust may be in the LORD, I have made them known to you today, even to you.

The purpose of these thirty sayings is so that you might put your trust in the LORD.
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.
And at the heart of living life *well* in this world
is trusting in the LORD.

This is what we were taught in Proverbs 3:5-6 –
“Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.”

I know that earlier I said that we don’t need the Bible
in order to know how to be “good people” –
but the problem is that we are *not* good people.

What went wrong?
And why do we find it so difficult to “be good”?

We’re out of alignment.
God made us to be rightly related to *him* – to one another – to creation – and to ourselves.
When we are out of tune with him,
then we tend to also be out of tune with others –
with creation – and with ourselves.

And that’s why the first step – the most important thing for getting back in tune –
is to *trust in the LORD*.

And to do that – “Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise.
Apply your heart to my knowledge,
for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you,
if all of them are ready on your lips.”

When we hear God’s teaching – and live the way that he says –
then what happens?

In my experience, trusting in the LORD and walking in his ways
has always resulted in a better life than when I don’t.

I’m not saying that everything always goes fine – nothing bad ever happens!
Rather, when bad things happen, and I’m *not* trusting God,
then I flail around and hurt others – and make a bad situation even worse.
But, when bad things happen, and I *am* trusting God,
then I’m not nearly so flustered – not nearly so fearful!
And I don’t hurt other people when I’m hurting.

With the result that life is more pleasant.

That's why these 30 sayings of the wise are so useful.

As you can see from your outline, there is a “decade” of sayings (sayings 2-11) that focus on wealth.

Once again we are seeing that Proverbs pays a lot of attention to our daily economic life. How you live at work matters – how you engage in business – how you think about money and social interactions makes a big difference.

And this makes sense, because we spend six days a week on our own employments. Six-sevenths of our time is spent here.

There are four sayings on the wrong ways to increase wealth (verses 22-28), then one saying on the right way (verse 29), followed by five more sayings on the wrong ways (23:1-11).

You'll notice that the last saying of the first four (verse 28) closely resembles the last saying of the second five (23:10-11) – and that numbers 1 and 10 open and close this section with a reference to God's protection of the poor.

2. Four Sayings on the Wrong Ways to Increase Wealth (22:22-28)

a. Saying 2 – Do Not Rob the Poor – or the LORD Will Rob You of Life (22:22-23)

²² *Do not rob the poor, because he is poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate,*

²³ *for the LORD will plead their cause
and rob of life those who rob them.*

How is it fair for God to “rob of life those who rob them”?

In the Law, God says that those who are guilty of robbery should pay back double. But robbery can become attempted murder.

Think about it:

if a man has three oxen – and you rob him of one,
you have harmed him – but he's not going to die.

But if a man has only one ox – and you rob him of it –
then he may not be able to feed his family this year.

Your robbery has become attempted murder.

The poor are already in a fragile condition.
They don't have much.

They need someone to plead their cause –
they need someone to come to their defense.

So if you don't – then the LORD will!
But when he does, he will destroy those who sought to destroy the poor.

By now it should be clear that Proverbs does not really distinguish
between the “deserving” poor and the “undeserving” poor.

After all, who *deserves* mercy?

We should always be mindful of the well-being of those who are helpless.
I think of my neighbors in the drug house next door.
Most of them fit the category of the poor.
If they do things that harm others and are caught,
then they will simply receive justice.

But if they are treated badly over things that really do no harm –
then I must come to their defense.

I struggled with that this week when their landlord told me that he was moving them out.
In one sense, I don't mind the idea of having quieter neighbors –
but at the same time, as we got to know their stories,
it wasn't always clear that they were being treated fairly.
I had hoped to have more opportunity
to show them the gospel of Jesus.

So, first and foremost – *don't try to make money by harming others.*

If I drive all the “undesirables” out of my neighborhood
in order to increase the value of my home,
then I am doing precisely what verse 22 says not to do.

If I am going to love my neighbor,
then I need to seek his well-being – and seek to be rightly related to him.

(Of course, if he tries to harm me – or others – then that needs to be dealt with!
But if he is just an “undesirable” then he belongs here just as much as I do!
We will never succeed at building strong communities by making people move away –
that just means that someone else has to deal with them –
which is incredibly selfish!)

Our third saying turns to the dangers of misplaced friendship:

b. Saying 3 – Do Not Associate with a Hothead (22:24-25)

²⁴ *Make no friendship with a man given to anger,*

*nor go with a wrathful man,
25 lest you learn his ways
and entangle yourself in a snare.*

Think about what this shows us about the importance of *friendship*.
A friend has your back.
A friend is one who will be there when you are in trouble.

If you are dealing with a man given to anger –
if anger and wrath is what characterizes him,
do not look to him as a mentor – do not tie your fate to his.
Because the more closely you are connected to him,
the more likely you will be entangled in his ways –
you may even learn to be like him yourself!

What is meant by a “man given to anger”?
This is a great phrase in Hebrew: “baal af” – master of a nose.

Make no friendship with a master of a nose!
The Hebrew word for nose is translated “anger” over 200 times in the OT.
In fact, it means “anger” more often than it means nose!

Every time you see the “anger of the LORD burned against” someone –
it is literally, “the nose of the LORD burned against...”

because when you get angry, your nose burns!

I have only been that angry a few times in my life –
but one of those times came a few years after I started studying Hebrew,
and I remember (in the midst of my anger) thinking,
“wow, now I understand why nose means anger in Hebrew!”

But to be a master of nose – a “lord of nose” –
means almost the opposite of what it sounds.

I think the ESV has translated it perfectly!

“a man given to anger.”

To be a “lord of anger” is to be controlled *by* anger.

Ironically, such a man is out of control –
raging violently against God or others –
doing harm and making a mess of his life.

Don’t look to him as a mentor – as a “friend” –
because his pattern of life will only ensnare you.

In the same way – in Saying 4 (verse 26):

c. Saying 4 – Do Not Put Up Security for Others’ Debts (22:26-27)

²⁶ *Be not one of those who give pledges,
who put up security for debts.*

²⁷ *If you have nothing with which to pay,
why should your bed be taken from under you?*

Don’t put at risk that which you cannot afford to lose!

But also – as we’ve seen in Proverbs before –
why would you be tempted to put up security for debts?
Because this is an easy way to make money!

Someone comes to you and says:

“Hey, I need \$1,000.

I’ll pay you \$1,100 next year, if you’ll loan me the thousand now!”

You could make \$100 (10% interest!) without doing anything!!

The Law did not allow Israelites to charge each other interest.

The idea was that you should not profit off each other –
and the assumption was that the only reason why you would borrow money
was because you were in dire need.

In our day, we use debt very differently.

But the basic principle at stake here is important:

do not try to get something for nothing.

Do not take advantage of others for your own selfish gain.

But along with that is the warning:

whatever you risk – you may lose!

If you risk your house by making it security for someone else’s loan –

then you may just lose your house –

or as verse 27 puts it, “why should your bed be taken from under you?”

Verse 28 then concludes the section:

d. Saying 5 – Do Not Move Ancient Landmarks (22:28)

²⁸ *Do not move the ancient landmark
that your fathers have set.*

In the ancient world, boundary markers were generally stone pillars or cairns.

They marked off the corners of a family’s property.

A stone pillar is hard to move – but not impossible.

There are stories of people who would come in the middle of the night –

once a year! –
and move the pillar just a few inches.

No one would notice the first year – or the second year –
it might be a decade before anyone started getting suspicious!

But this prohibition is not *just* about stealing.

After all, this prohibition is absolute.

Simply *do not* move these ancient landmarks!

And that is especially connected to God's promise to Abraham –

the promise of the land, and the seed, and the blessing to the nations.

God had promised this land to Israel –

and since God had promised to *dwell* with his people in the land –

by moving the ancient landmarks,

you are disconnecting people from God's promise!

The Law of Moses made clear that *land* could not be permanently alienated.

You could rent your land – you could lease your land –

but you could not permanently *sell* your land to another.

The Land is forever connected to the Seed.

(Houses that were located in walled cities could be sold permanently)

(Of course, as we see throughout the OT, Israel did *very poorly*

at obeying the Law – so I'm not saying that Israel actually did this!)

but in theory – people in Jesus' day would have still been living on the same property
where their direct ancestors lived over a thousand years before!

So how do you increase wealth properly?!

There is but one saying on that in this section!

Verse 29:

2. One Saying on How to Increase Wealth Properly: Saying 6 – The Skilled Man Will Stand before Kings (22:29)

²⁹ *Do you see a man skillful in his work?*

He will stand before kings;

he will not stand before obscure men.

Be *skillful* in your work.

The word is used of Ezra – where is called a skillful scribe (Ezra 7:6),

and in Psalm 45 it is used of a skillful songwriter.

The term does not describe 'natural talent' –

but of someone who has worked hard to master his craft.

This is the exact opposite of the sluggard.
This is someone who gets to work – shows initiative –
works hard – is eager to learn and improve.

And such a one will stand before kings.

This phrase “stand before” suggests that the craftsman is presenting himself to the king
as he seeks a royal commission for his work.

In other words, this is someone who is confident in his work –
confident enough to approach the king – indeed, to approach multiple kings (!)
because he knows that he does good work.

This is not arrogance.

If you do good work – it is not arrogant to seek out an important contract.

Think of the last statement – “he will not stand before obscure men” –
he knows what his work is worth – and so he pursues those jobs.

This is not arrogance or selfishness –
this is integrity – this is wholeness.

This is the world is operating as it should.

3. Five More Sayings on Wrong Ways to Increase Wealth (23:1-11) **a. Saying 7 – Beware of Greed – the Lure of Power (23:1-3)**

Of course, the problem is that we live in a world that does not always operate as it should!
And that’s why sayings 7-11 return to the wrong ways.

Saying 7 keeps us in the king’s court.

When you are there at court – and when you are invited to dinner –
be careful!

*23 When you sit down to eat with a ruler,
observe carefully what^[a] is before you,*

*² and put a knife to your throat
if you are given to appetite.*

*³ Do not desire his delicacies,
for they are deceptive food.*

Do not mistake the invitation for friendship.

Rulers – powerful people – often have their own agendas.

Don’t assume that he is truly interested in *your* good.

Remember that powerful people may wish to use the trappings of power

in order to sway you – in order to get you to do what *they* want.

This proverb is at the heart of what Edmond learned the hard way
in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

The Witch’s food bewitched him.

The Turkish Delight delighted him.

And his longing for power and revenge ensnared him –
so that he sought to do her bidding, and betray his brother and his sisters.

And in the same way – saying 8 – verse 4:

b. Saying 8 – Do Not Toil for Wealth – the Fleetingness of Riches (23:4-5)

⁴ *Do not toil to acquire wealth;*

be discerning enough to desist.

⁵ *When your eyes light on it, it is gone,*

for suddenly it sprouts wings,

flying like an eagle toward heaven.

Remember what is good:

“a man skillful in his work” –

Such a man will do well.

He may even become wealthy.

But he does not toil to *acquire* wealth.

Wealth is not the *point* of his work.

God put Adam in the garden of Eden – “to work it and keep it.”

In the fourth commandment, God says, “Six days shall you labor and do all your work...”

God made us to work.

Physical work – intellectual work – all sorts of work is *good*.

And when we work wisely and well –

when we work skillfully before God –

the point is not to accumulate wealth –

but to glorify God and to enjoy him forever!

After all, if you are seeking God’s glory – that will last forever –

but if you are seeking to acquire wealth – that will fade away –

or more poignantly – that will *fly away!!* like an eagle toward heaven.

Wealth *properly* comes as a byproduct of living rightly

in relation to God, others, self, and creation.

And so saying 9 returns to the theme of desiring delicacies:

c. Saying 9 – Do Not Eat the Bread of the Stingy (23:6-8)

⁶ *Do not eat the bread of a man who is stingy;*^[b]

do not desire his delicacies,

⁷ *for he is like one who is inwardly calculating.*^[c]

“Eat and drink!” he says to you,

but his heart is not with you.

⁸ *You will vomit up the morsels that you have eaten,*

and waste your pleasant words.

It's not just rulers – it is anyone who is stingy (who has an “evil eye”).

We've seen before that a man who has a “good eye” is a generous man –

so a man who has an “evil eye” is a stingy man –

he is inwardly calculating –

his heart is not with you – he is against you!

How do you learn to know a stingy man?

How do you learn to recognize that “evil eye”?

Experience.

A young man once asked a successful businessman the secret of his success.

“Good decisions,” was the laconic reply.

How can I learn to make good decisions?

The older man paused, and finally said: “Bad decisions”

That may not sound all that encouraging.

Do I have to learn all this for myself?

Yes – I'm afraid so.

But here's what I can give you:

I can tell you here is what you should watch out for!

I can tell you – “Don't the bread of a man who is stingy!”

But I cannot give you three simple rules for identifying stingy men!

I can simply warn you that when you learn to identify that “evil eye” –
stay away from him!

And – by the way – it never hurts to trust your gut!

If you have that gut feeling – “I should stay away from this person” –
that is often your first clue.

It has served me well over the years.

Most of the time, when I have that gut feeling – it turns out there was a reason for it!

On the other hand, as I get older, I have realized that my reaction needs to change!

Now, when I have that gut feeling, I've realized that it is often my calling to *get closer*.
After all, if this person is actively *harming others* –
then I may need to get closer in order to protect the helpless.

And, of course, if my gut was wrong – and this was a decent human being,
then I just made a good friend!

Our 10th saying has lots of illustrations these days!

d. Saying 10 – Do Not Speak in the Hearing of a Fool (23:9)

⁹ *Do not speak in the hearing of a fool,
for he will despise the good sense of your words.*

Do not answer a fool according to his folly – lest you become like him yourself.
The fool has no sense – and so he is incapable of hearing you aright.
The wise man will not waste his time trying to convince a fool.

Now, I should clarify something:
there are some people who are not necessarily full-fledged fools!
They only play the fool on Facebook!

In other words, if you can sit down and have a face-to-face conversation,
they may be able to hear you.
This is why I spend *very* little time on social media.
Most of what I do on Facebook is post pictures of our home renovation project,
and click “like” on updates about my extended family and friends!

Oh – and in case you didn't get the point in saying 5, saying 11 repeats it more forcefully!

e. Saying 11 – Do Not Move an Ancient Landmark – for Their Redeemer Is Strong (23:10-11).

¹⁰ *Do not move an ancient landmark
or enter the fields of the fatherless,*
¹¹ *for their Redeemer is strong;
he will plead their cause against you.*

Verse 10 points out what is so evil about moving an ancient landmark.
How would you get away with it?
Because the man of the house died –
and his widow and children are so busy surviving
that they won't notice that you moved their property boundary!

When John Breckinridge died in 1806, he left a widow with several young children.

He also left a large complicated estate.
There was an enterprising young lawyer who got involved to “help” the family –
and along the way learned some important pieces of information
that enabled him to put himself in a position to make a lot of money –
at the expense of the Breckinridge estate.

From what I can tell, this lawyer did *nothing* illegal.
It was technically “public information” – just only known to a handful of lawyers!

A lawyer could have used that information to *help* the family –
or he could use it to enrich himself.

This is where you start wondering, “what if...?”
If this lawyer had been the sort of man to plead the cause of the fatherless –
what would have happened?
What *did* happen was that this lawyer made a lot of enemies –
and when a young man published an attack against him,
his son felt the need to defend his father’s honor.

His son killed the editor of the newspaper that published the attack –
and when a jury acquitted the young man
(because he was just defending his father’s reputation),
the new editor of the newspaper challenged the son to a duel –
and killed him.

It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that a man who built his estate by robbing orphans
lost all four of his sons to early deaths.

Their Redeemer is strong – and he will plead their cause against you!
God will not be mocked!

The point of this story is *not* that you might think of all the people
who have done bad things to *you*.
The point is not for you to gloat that *they’re going to get theirs!!!*

The point is that *you* need to make sure not to mistreat others –
because otherwise, God will deal with you!

And therefore we really need to hear verse 12 in closing:
“Apply your heart to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge.”
Take heed! And repent!
Turn away from these self-serving, self-promoting, self-aggrandizing ways!