

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR STUDY IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

PART NINE – CHAPTERS 25-27 – PROVERBS WHICH STOOD THE TEST OF TIME

Chapter 24 concluded Solomon's own writing of Proverbs. In the last few chapters he provided us with superb insight into the world's greatest social problem, poverty. He contrasted the way the rich and the poor saw each other. The rich see the condition of the poor as self-inflicted by laziness and proudly regard themselves as superior. Education is one of their means of maintaining their dominance. The poor on the other hand see the rich as greedy, corrupt, and unjust, and look at them with envy, unable to believe that they could ever succeed themselves. Wild living can turn the rich into the poor, or keep the poor in poverty. Wisdom on the other hand quietly transforms each view and expectation into the elements of a generous and compassionate fellowship.

The next five chapters are a remarkable document. Two hundred years later in the time of King Hezekiah when briefly there was a time of spiritual revival, (II Kgs. 18:1-12) the king's scribes collected and wrote down many more of Solomon's proverbs. Imagine how these words of wisdom had been remembered, applied and passed on to the next generation because they had proved so valuable. Grandmothers would probably have been the chief teachers of these proverbs. The same five notes are replayed over and over - listen to God, let Him change your heart, your speech, your behaviour and your work. For the most part these proverbs are grouped into now familiar themes. Some of these later proverbs repeat Solomon's own writing because they had proved so powerful when memorised and treasured. Many of these proverbs are quoted and developed in the New Testament by Jesus, James and Paul.

Appropriately the collection begins in chapter 25 with a section for leaders. God in His mercy hides our sin while leaders want nothing hidden from them, but in turn hide themselves from those they lead. (v.2,3) A wise leader wants to remove wrong from those he leads so that the real thing will be seen. (v.4,5) Promoting ourselves is an expression of pride that will so often lead to embarrassment when leaders put us down. (v.6,7) Jesus had this proverb in mind when He rebuked the religious people in Luke 14:7-11. We frequently ask leaders to take our side in disputes with neighbours only to be humiliated when the whole story emerges. (v.8-10) Jesus recognised how hate in our hearts leads to hasty accusations. (Matt. 5:21-26) By contrast wise words carefully chosen and graciously presented will be well received and treasured. They will be far more persuasive than arrogant aggression. (v.11-15)

A number of timeless warnings about everyday life follow – too much sugar, invading our neighbour's private space, slander, being unreliable in keeping our word, and being insensitive to those who are hurting around us. (v.16-20) The Old Testament law provided a means of justice and at the same time commanded us to love our neighbour. (Lev. 19:18) Solomon put the two together into a proverb which shocked people then and still does today. Jesus echoed part of the same revolutionary idea in Matt. 5:43,44 and Paul used the whole proverb in Rom. 12:20 to illustrate how different transformed living would look in practice. (v.21,22) So often the attack from the enemy will come in the form of painful words and an angry face even at home. (v.23,24) There are various ways we can respond. We can share good news instead. But don't give in. Don't insist on your own honour. If we keep control of our temper even when we are provoked we are invulnerable. (v.25-28)

Hezekiah's scribes collected a whole series of well used proverbs about the fool at the beginning of chapter 26. He is the man who thinks he knows it all and so is unteachable. Complimenting a fool is totally out of place. Let the angry words of a fool bounce off us. (v.1,2) 'Rod' is the same word,

‘shebet’, which we saw in relation to disciplining a child. It is about authority rather than a weapon. The fool needs to be brought under control.(v.3) Don’t answer a fool in his own terms but with the wisdom of God.(v.4,5) Sending a message by a fool will only create trouble.(v.6,7) A stone tied to a sling will go nowhere like compliments to a fool.(v.8) A proverb spoken by a fool will only harm him.(v.9) Hiring a fool for a job will be a disaster. Fools inevitably repeat their mistakes because they cannot see the problem.(v.10-12) Peter applied verse 11 to false teachers.(II Pet.2:22)

The next collection of proverbs by the scribes concerned the lazy man who has every excuse for not leaving home, needs more time in bed, has not even the energy to eat but thinks of himself as smart.(v.13-16) Next the scribes emphasise some effective ways of getting ourselves into trouble like interfering in someone else’s argument or playing practical jokes on our neighbour.(v.17-19) Gossip stirs up trouble because some people love to feed on it.(v.21,22) Our outward appearance can hide the mean intention of our words which is only to destroy, even though cunningly disguised as grace.(v.23-25) But be sure in time everyone will find out and our cruel words will rebound on us while we try to destroy others.(26-28)

Chapter 27 begins with a proverb developed further by both Jesus,(Matt.6:34; Luke 12:19,20) and James,(James 4:13-16) in the New Testament. Wisdom starts with saying ‘I don’t know!’(v.1) Self praise is a mark of a fool,(v.2) who can really annoy us if we let him.(v.3) Beware his jealousy too.(v.4) The next two verses encourage straight talking motivated by love.(v.5,6) Two attractions are powerful, any food when we are hungry and a place to call home when we are homeless.(v.7,8) Friends and a caring neighbour who offers wisdom and support in hard times are immensely precious.(v.9,10)

Much of the book of Proverbs expresses Solomon’s longing for a wise son of whom he could be proud. He hopes his son will know how to walk away from trouble, whether in unnecessary debt or immorality.(v.11-13) Certain things irritate us more than others, an overly cheerful friend too early in the morning, or a nagging wife.(v.14-16) Solomon repeated this latter proverb over and over, aggravated no doubt by having so many of them!(Prov.19:13; 21:9,19) Iron sharpening iron is an exciting process in which we share ideas and challenge one another. As Bible teachers we have nothing to lose and much to gain by testing our material on our peers and being prepared to listen as they constructively debate.(v.17) We are encouraged to care for those whom we serve, to look honestly into our hearts, to find satisfaction in life because we will not find it in death and to let the real value of each man be revealed.(v.18-21) Face it, we cannot beat a fool into wisdom!(v.22) The chapter concludes with a series of exhortations to the farmer to care well for his flocks, herds and land which will endure when money and power have departed.(v.23-27)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. How does human leadership contrast with God’s ideal of leadership according to Solomon? How did Jesus and Paul use the wisdom of chapter 25 to underline the key ideas in their messages? What good advice for everyday life did Solomon give here?
2. How can we recognise if we have been fools? What is the starting point for foolishness?(Psalm 14:1) How can we help the fool? How can we realise our laziness? What is the real reason why men are lazy? What other ways does chapter 26 describe by which we hurt others?
3. What examples does chapter 27 give of wisdom in daily life? How have you found ‘iron sharpening iron’ to work in the Christian church? Check this principle in Acts 15.
4. Which verses will you memorise this week? What was the best one last time?