

Proverbs 1:1-6

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/prov/prov-1/proverbs-11-6/>

Solomon begins The Book of Proverbs by establishing the authority from which he writes. He then fires off a set of clauses that set up the purpose of life and the intent behind the book.

The first six verses of Proverbs are one very long, continuous sentence in the NASB version of the Bible. This sentence explains the author, purpose, and audience of these writings.

These are *the proverbs of Solomon*, one of the most renowned kings in the history of Israel. The word *proverb* is the Hebrew word “mashal.” The root of the word contains the idea of “compare”—it is translated throughout Scripture as “parable” just as often as “proverb.” This gives us some insight into the nature of these sayings. Proverbs are not prescriptions. It is not about a formula for how to manipulate circumstances and bend them to our will. They are, in a sense, “comparing” our human understanding to the reality of God’s world; trying to connect the two by providing principles that can shape our perspective and inform our choices.

Like parables, the proverbs are meant to guide us *to wisdom*, that is, into a way of living. A way of thinking and perceiving, and the choices that stem from that thinking. It is about molding and shaping our perceptions, values and character into something that is consistently in tune with God, not just as a rule-follower but as someone who understands and practices the essence of the divine.

The first verse establishes *Solomon, the son of David and king in Israel*, as the author of The Book of Proverbs. *Solomon* is heralded as the *son of David* – establishing his authority through the lineage of God’s chosen rulers, out of which The Messiah will be born—and the *king of Israel*—the ruler of Israel’s government at the zenith of its worldly power, wealth, and influence. *Solomon*, then, is an authority by ancestry, Messianic lineage, and worldly renown.

Solomon is also the primary author of Biblical wisdom literature, having authored Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and most of the Proverbs. Job is the only wisdom literature book that does not involve Solomon.

Wisdom literature, and therefore Proverbs, is specifically concerned with the practical realities of life in God’s world. Ecclesiastes introduces the idea that life is “hebel” (vaporous); “hebel” appears 38 times in Ecclesiastes. The point is that life is full of mystery we cannot fully understand. Although life is “hebel,” we have been granted by God the freedom to make moral choices. And we can make choices from the basis of one of two fundamental perspectives—seeking control or acting in faith.

If we respond to “hebel” with faith in God, it leads to wisdom and fulfillment (Ecclesiastes 5:18-20). If we try to gain full comprehension to attempt to control the “hebel” it leads to madness and folly (Ecclesiastes 10:12-15). Proverbs puts wheels on this idea and moves to show us how to put faith into action. It is a practical guide on HOW to live a life based on faith (i.e., wisdom).

God made the world. He reveals how it works through His servant Solomon. Life is too complicated to be tamed through a formulaic set of rules. What is required is a proper set of values, perspectives, and motivations.

The Pharisees made a list of rules they followed to show that they were righteous, while at the same time they violated God's principles in significant ways (Matthew 23). The *proverbs*, much like the law, are a set of principles that can be misused, misapplied, and perverted. We need a posture of faith and a perspective of wisdom to apply these proverbs rightly.

When Solomon asks for *wisdom* from God (1 Kings 3-4), he is not just asking for moral direction. He is asking how to put the moral direction into effective action. For example: "Should I serve the poor?" is a question of morality. But answering that question is just the beginning. Next comes the bigger question: "**H**ow should I serve the poor?" There are ways we can feel we are "serving" that can harm the poor, and even reinforce poverty cycles.

So, the focus of the Book of Proverbs is *to know wisdom*. And *wisdom* is the question of how to practically live an effective and fulfilled life in our complicated world. This purpose is set out in verses 2 through 6 via clauses that all begin with the preposition *to* or "in order to." There are six "*to*" clauses in this first sentence (verses 1-6) of Proverbs.

First, *to know wisdom and instruction*. That is, to learn, discover, and practice the skill of *wisdom*. *Wisdom* is not just a theory, it is a practicable skill that can be either learned and honed or ignored and atrophied. The word translated *instruction* is the Hebrew "muwcar" and it has the connotation of discipline or correction. It means being put aright when one has gone wrong. Allowing oneself to be properly aligned or, when necessary, re-aligned. The path to gain *wisdom* goes through learning and correction, namely *instruction*. That means the one who is wise will actively seek to self-reflect, discover faults, and embrace change for the better.

The second "*to*" clause is *to discern the sayings of understanding*. The word *discern* here is the same as the word translated *understanding* later in the clause. So, literally, *to understand the sayings of understanding*. These Proverbs are to help us comprehend the *sayings* or *words* of comprehension. To *understand* the parables and the illustrations in a more plain, straightforward manner. The *understanding* will lead to positive change. Which, again, means the path to wisdom requires seeking and listening for correction and *instruction*.

The third clause is *to receive instruction* ("muwcar" again) *in wise behavior, righteousness, justice and equity*. Here, Solomon explicitly connects wisdom with action. The goal is *wise behavior*. Solomon also uses *righteousness* (social harmony), *justice* (the law and its application), and *equity* (impartiality) as ways to receive the correction of *instruction*—ways to be put onto the right path. The path of *wisdom*. To gain *wisdom* requires *receiving* and applying *instruction*. Which again emphasizes that in order to be wise we must seek and apply positive change.

Knowing what to believe, let alone what to do, is difficult and can seem impossible. But with God's help, and with the help of mentors, we can discern what is wise and what is foolish. Since

we cannot do it all on our own, it is necessary for us to *receive instruction*. And what is impossible to do alone becomes a joy when we have this essential help.

The fourth and fifth clause are similar in nature: (4) *To give prudence to the naïve*, and (5) *to the youth knowledge and discretion*. These differ from clauses 1–3, in that Solomon introduces who he is writing The Book of Proverbs for—the *naïve* and *youth*.

Many Biblical scholars think The Book of Proverbs was a sort of textbook for boys in an ancient-Israel school—that this was explicitly written for *youth* on the precipice of adulthood, to teach *wisdom*, the way of the world, truth, and character. The illustrations later in the book—father/son, a seductress, a virtuous/desirous wife, etc.—certainly seem to support this idea.

Prudence entails an element of cunning. Shrewdness. Understanding how the world operates. The word here for *knowledge* does also. It is the Hebrew word “da’ath,” which means “knowledge/discernment, perception, skill.” It is not just about the book smarts of *knowledge*, but the street smarts as well—how does one use and apply *knowledge*? “Da’ath” is the same word used to describe the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil in the garden of Eden, from which Adam and Eve were not supposed to eat (Genesis 2:9, 17). If we steward this *knowledge* well, we align with the heart of God. Adam and Eve had the opportunity to align their hearts with God through obedience. They did not need a tree to obey God. But instead they chose a source of knowledge apart from God. When we start to believe/act as though *knowledge* has a source apart from God, it is a poison that leads us to sin and destruction.

Discretion includes a significant amount of intention – doing things on purpose. Having insight and understanding, and knowing how to apply the principles of *wisdom* to the circumstances being encountered. All the emphasis is upon the decisions of the student discerning his environment, choosing actions within his surroundings that will lead to fulfillment rather than madness and folly.

Verse 5 seems to be a parenthetical comment. *A wise man will hear and increase in learning, And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel*. The *young and naïve* (v. 4) make a perfect audience for The Book of Proverbs because they are formulating their worldview and deciding upon the foundation of their character. Research shows the frontal cortex (the decision-making portion of our brain) is the last section of our mind to fully develop. It is still forming into late adolescence. So, v. 5 is telling these young men the three key components to a wise foundation for life: *hear, increase in learning, and acquire wise counsel*. This is the path to becoming a *wise man*. A person in any stage of life gains wisdom with these three practices, but it is especially important for a *youth* during their foundational and formative years. Many human institutions, from gangs to youth ministry, political organizations to marketing trends, have discovered the importance and power of reaching an audience in these formative years.

The phrasing also makes it clear that *acquiring wisdom* is a lifetime pursuit. The young men are being launched on a quest that will continue for their entire lifetime. Although this might have initially been intended as training for young men, the fact that wisdom is personified as being feminine would seem to also provide an invitation for females to also acquire *wisdom*.

The sixth and final “to” clause is: *To understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles*. Here, we have the return of the Hebrew word “mashal” translated as *proverb* (or parable). The word for *figure* can also be translated “enigma”, “satire”, or “taunting.” The word for *riddle* can also be translated “dark sayings” or “perplexing words.” All of these are saying the same thing—the Book of Proverbs is about better comprehending the truth behind the vaporous nature of the world (“hebel”; Ecclesiastes 1:2). Proverbs is intended to provide practical principles, examples and illustrations that will guide the reader toward effective and fulfilling life choices.

Humans often try to do deal with the “hebel” (or vapor) of the world through escape or rationalization (internal narratives and external ones), as well as attempting to control behavior through creating laws. Neither creates a genuine solution. Solomon’s task is to make plain the hard-to-reach essence of our reality, the practical “what does this mean” to our difficult and hard to grasp words/illustrations. This gives each person the agency to navigate a complex, vaporous world and make wise decisions along the way.

Sometimes stories, parables and illustrations help us embrace truth by presenting reality in a manner that is more accessible. That is Solomon’s approach with many of the proverbs. They will provide an illustration or picture that better allows us to engage with the underlying principle.

It is to this end Solomon sets forth The Book of Proverbs. Solomon gives us the means to wrestle with the “hebel” of life, the enigmatic nature of truth and wisdom. He will show us how to apply wisdom and live effectively in a perplexing, vaporous world.

Biblical Text:

The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:

² **To know wisdom and instruction,**

To discern the sayings of understanding,

³ **To receive instruction in wise behavior,**

Righteousness, justice and equity;

⁴ **To give prudence to the naive,**

To the youth knowledge and discretion,

⁵ **A wise man will hear and increase in learning,**

And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel,

⁶ **To understand a proverb and a figure,**

The words of the wise and their riddles.