

# THE PROVERBS

## Sunday Morning # 50

PETER says, "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." There is great need for, and advantage in, obeying this injunction. We live in a day when men speak in a style very different from the oracles of God. Apart from the doctrines that are in universal favour, the style of speech is emasculated and thin. The ideas are few, and these in their expression are spread over an extended surface; starvation is the result to those who feed on them. There is a famine, not of bread, but of the Word of the Lord. A conceited philosophy on the one hand, and an utterly impoverished theology on the other, have given the world a colourless language, destitute of all truly nutritive elements. The Spirit of God calls with great reason upon the sons of men to turn from their famine-stricken diet, to the fatness provided in the oracles of God, in which they may delight their souls; but the call is disregarded, the world is enamoured of its own ways and its own thoughts. In the language of Apocalyptic figure, it is drunk, and drunken men have no relish for wholesome food. This dementedness shown in the universal taste for the starvation garbage of the natural man's philosophy will continue to prevail until the day of fat things, the day of the blessing of Abraham to all nations, shall be inaugurated by the man whom God hath appointed. A few, however, amid the teeming millions will be found in wisdom's way when that day arrives. It is our privilege to have been invited to walk in this way. Let us hold fast well by this first lesson of wisdom; "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God."

We are helped to do this by our practice of reading the Scriptures, not only in our daily private life, but in all our assemblies as the foundation of our thoughts. This morning we are with Solomon. Some have doubted whether we ought to regard his sayings as the oracles of God; but such a doubt can only exist where there is a neglect to take into account the apostolic recognition of these sayings as the voice of God; The judgment of the apostles is an unerring guide to us on such a point; for Christ said the Spirit would be with them to guide them into all truth (John 16:13). And Paul lays it down that any man truly enlightened will acknowledge apostolic sayings to be the commandments of the Lord (1 Cor. 14:37). In view of this, the divine character of the Proverbs is settled by Paul's quotation of them in this character. He expressly refers to Proverbs 3:11, as "The exhortation which speaketh unto YOU as unto children" (Heb. 12:5). It is unnecessary by the side of this to refer for confirmation to the fact that Proverbs constituted a part of "the Scriptures" to which Jesus always referred as the standard of divine authority, nor to the fact that God gave Solomon "wisdom and understanding exceeding much . . . and his wisdom excelled

all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt: for he was wiser than all men" (1 Kings 4:29). What if the Proverbs consist largely of sayings previously current in Israel, and collected by Solomon? Whence came these current wise sayings? Were they not due to the presence in Israel from generation to generation of men of divine illumination, such as Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, and many others? And whatever their origin, was not Solomon's adoption of them the explicit sanction of God? Any other view is inconsistent with all the facts of the case, and would rob us of one of the most precious storehouses of wisdom accessible to man.

When we make the acquaintance of the Proverbs, we not only obtain a large confirmation of the wisdom elsewhere indicated in the holy oracles, but we find a supply of correctives of especial value in view of the extremes in which it is possible to run in the unaided endeavour to carry out some of the divine precepts. "Take no thought for the morrow," says Jesus; "consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin." Paul also says, "I would have you without carefulness." These exhortations, rightly applied, do not exclude providence and reasonable preparation, because they are directed against distraction, the word translated care, and meaning anxiety of a worrying kind. But they are capable of misapplication, and have been misapplied by some who have held them to justify absolute shiftlessness and inattention to secular contingencies. The Proverbs supply the antidote to this mistake, even if it were not to be found in the New Testament. They enjoin the exercise of a diligent foresight of our affairs. "Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, and look well to thy herds" (27:23) "The hand of the diligent maketh rich" (10:4). "The hand of the diligent shall bear rule" (12:24). "The soul of the diligent shall be made fat" (13:4). "Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings" (22:29).

On the other side of the question, idleness is held up to reprobation. The idle soul shall suffer hunger" (19:15). "The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothing" (13:4). "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest" (6:6-8). "The slothful shall be under tribute" (12:24).

The caviller might contend that this was a case in which one part of the Scriptures taught a different doctrine from another; that Solomon was contradicted by Christ. But it is not so. The principle of prudent foresight and diligent provision is plainly recognized in the New Testament, though not so prominently taught as in the Proverbs. There was more need for the inculcation of faith than industry, because the one comes less naturally

than the other; and, therefore, faith is more conspicuously taught, but not at the expense of industry. Industry is also enjoined. Paul says, "If any man work not, neither shall he eat" (2 Thess. 3:10). "If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1 Tim. 5:8). "Provide for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of all men" (2 Cor. 8:21). "Let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth" (Eph. 4:28). Jesus illustrates these injunctions in the command to "gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost" (John 6:12); and also in the words addressed to his apostles when the time had come for a suspension of the miraculous supervision under which they had laboured: "When I sent you without purse, and scrip, and shoes, lacked ye anything? And they said, Nothing. Then said he unto them, But now he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise his scrip: and he that hath no sword, let him, sell his garment, and buy one" (Luke 22:35, 36).

There is a place for faith, where our anxiety can avail nothing. We are to trust that God will bring to pass the provision of all we need, if we confide the matter to Him. At the same time, we are not to relax those efforts upon which He has made the provision to depend in the second place. Any man who neglects these is a breaker of the word, however much faith he may think he has. The thing to be careful about is to see that our prudence does not degenerate to faithlessness, and interfere with the performance of duty, whether to God or man. God hath united things in certain relations, and what God hath joined, let no man put asunder. Wisdom is the putting of everything into its right place. Faith does its best without anxiety, and trusts for the rest; the feeling that would leave all to God is presumption. One thing is the appointment of God as well as another, and we must give all their place. In this, the Book of Proverbs is a great help.

While diligence is commended in the Proverbs, diligence to achieve individual wealth is discountenanced, and even condemned. Thus we read "Labour not to be rich ... wilt thou set thine eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven" (23:4,5). Again, "A faithful man shall abound with blessings (that is, to others): but he that maketh haste to be rich shall not be innocent" (28:20). Here the Spirit by Solomon prevents the prudential maxims from being carried to an extreme. The man who aims to be rich aims wrongly. He not only aims at a result that will "pierce himself through with many sorrows" even if he succeed, but he encumbers himself with a motive which will paralyse his arm in all directions of beauty and goodness, and which will, at last, sink him in perdition. "Neither poverty nor riches" is the condition commended in the Proverbs (30:8). This is in strict harmony with the spirit of the New Testament. Jesus said to His disciples, "Your Father

knoweth what things ye have need of," and taught them to pray for their daily bread; but on the subject of pursuing riches, he used the parable of the man with the barns, described as a fool, "which had much goods laid up for many years," and whose life was suddenly required of him. Christ's comment on the case is, "So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

There are other matters in which the Proverbs afford checks against extremes. Paul recommends patience with adversaries, exhorting that in meekness we should instruct those who oppose themselves. Jesus commands kindness to all, even the undeserving; and counsels submission to evil, and compliance with request even to the double of what is asked. There is a place for the operation of all these precepts; but they are misapplied when they are allowed to interfere with the attitude of wisdom presented in these sayings of Solomon: "Go from the presence of a foolish man when thou perceivest not in him the lips of knowledge" (14:7). "Speak not in the ears of a fool: for he will despise the wisdom of thy words" (23:9). "Cast out the scorner, and contention shall go out; yea, strife and reproach shall cease" (22:10). Christ and the apostles are themselves on the side of these counsels. While exhorting us to patience, forbearance, love, kindness, etc., Christ says, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine" (Matt. 7:6). "Beware of false prophets ... ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:15). "Let him (a man refusing to reason) be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican" (Matt. 18:17). So also Paul: "Beware of dogs: beware of evil workers" (Phil. 3:2). "Withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly" (2 Thess. 3:6). "False brethren ... to whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour" (Gal. 2:5). "Of some have compassion, making a difference: others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh" (Jude 23). On the same principle, we are commanded to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints, and to have no fellowship with any who subvert the doctrine of the apostles in faith or practice. The two sets of precepts are not inconsistent, though made so in the practice of some. Our kindness may abound with a plenteousness that goes beyond the requests of those who ask us, and we may exercise a patience as nearly unwearying as may be, and a magnanimity that shall be godlike toward the evil and erring, without taking fools into our bosom, or suffering the highest interests of ourselves and others to be endangered by a weak friendship for those whose ways decline to death.

So also on the subject of knowledge. There is a relation of things in which "knowledge puffeth up," and in which "if any man thinketh he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know" (1 Cor. 8:2). At the same time it is true, and Solomon helps us to the recognition of it, "that the

soul be without knowledge is not good" (Prov. 19:2). "A man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels" (1:5). "When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul, discretion shall preserve thee, and understanding shall keep thee" (2:10,11).

The same thing is testified by the prophets and the apostles. In Hosea we read (4:6), "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge"; in Isaiah, "By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many" (53:11). Paul says "ignorance" alienates the Gentiles from the life of God (Eph. 4:18), but that the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ is a saving power (2 Cor.4:3-5). The day of Christ is a day in which "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord " (Isa.11:9). "Wisdom and knowledge shall be the stability of his times" (Isa. 33:6).

On many other subjects there is the same clear guidance in the Proverbs on points on which men are liable to run and have run, into extremes. There is no conflict between what Solomon says and what the Spirit of wisdom inculcates through other instruments; only some phases and matters are more distinctly put in the Proverbs, and by this, wise men are held at their equilibrium. There are those who are not wise, because they obey not the command by Solomon which says, "Incline thine ear to wisdom; apply thine heart to understanding; seek her as silver; search for her as for hid treasure." Some never are able rightly to divide the word of truth, but are always stumbling on appearances of discrepancy and conflict, and incline to the side of such as scorn the word. Sympathizing with the scorner, they experience the fate of scornors. Solomon says, "The scorner seeketh wisdom, and findeth it not: but knowledge is easy unto him that understandeth" (14:6). The inability of this class to find wisdom is not altogether due to incapacity. God stands in their way as the angel did in Balaam's." Surely he scorneth the scornors: but he giveth grace unto the lowly" (3:34). God is only to be found of those who seek Him in an earnest and diligent manner. This is testified many times in the word. "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you" (Jas. 4:8). "Ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13)." If thou seek him, he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off" (1 Chron. 28:9). These features find their expression in the words of Christ: "Except a man receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall in no wise enter therein." A simple, docile, childlike, disinterested, unbiased, and perfectly candid and earnest desire and search for truth is essential to the acquisition of divine wisdom. To any other state of mind, the fountain is sealed. It is easy for God to draw the veil without a man's knowing it. In this way, He has blinded Israel, and thus He blinds many a man who scornfully seeketh wisdom, but findeth it not.

The Proverbs resemble every other part of the oracles of God as regards the nature and origin of the wisdom set forth. They are not like the systems of the ancients (though, by the way, Solomon is more ancient than any of them). These, who are spoken of as "the wise," made wisdom a mere matter of observing nature and speculating on the working methods of her operations. They did not know God, and could know nothing of His revelation and His superintendence and purposes as the principal element of wisdom. Hence their wisdom is foolishness for all practical purposes. It is thin, watery, tasteless, powerless stuff. There is nothing in common between the philosophers and Solomon. Solomon has nothing to say for "philosophy" -- which, in truth, is a glorified abstraction, having no existence except in the language and brains of those who know nothing of true wisdom. He mounts as high as heaven, and puts his finger, so to speak, on the only source of wisdom. "The Lord giveth wisdom; out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding" (2:6). "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7; 9:10). "The fear of the Lord is a fountain Of life (14:27). "Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long" (23:17). "It shall be well with them that fear God" (Eccl. 8:12). "Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl. 12:13).

Here is a feature peculiar to the Bible. In the Bible only is God's view of the case made a practical element of behaviour and destiny. "The Lord loveth him that followeth after righteousness"; "The prayer of the upright is his delight" (Prov. 15:9, 8). "The Lord is far from the wicked: but he heareth the prayer of the righteous" (29). "Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord" (16:5). And surely God's view of a case is the most important fact concerning it; for with Him is the power to raise up or cast down, to save or to kill, to confer good or render evil. Since all things are of Him and in His hand, it is no mere religious extravagance (so-called), but the sober truth, to say that His fear is the beginning of all knowledge and wisdom. The philosophy that excludes this is a philosophy of human pride, and a philosophy lacking the very core of truth. Men like to glorify themselves by the investigation and promulgation of what is. But the glory even of this is to Him whom they forget, in whose hand their breath is, and whose are even the little and vain efforts by which they presume to construct a system of wisdom without God in it. And of what avail, as a matter of wisdom, is the knowledge of what is (as presented in science and philosophy), as compared with a knowledge of the pleasure of Him who has power to change what is, and who has declared His purpose so to do as regards both the righteous and the wicked?

This is the most beautiful feature of the Proverbs, their constant fundamental dependence on the future dispensation of God's power in the

destiny of man. Some think the Proverbs of a merely secular application, that is, that their wisdom depends upon considerations limited to the present life. That they are profitable for the life that now is, is true, as it is also true of the Gospel (1Tim. 4:8), but that their chief bearing is towards that coming arrangement of things upon earth which has been the purpose of God from the beginning, will not be denied by those who have pondered the following sayings: "The wicked is driven away in his wickedness; but the righteous hath hope IN HIS DEATH" (14:32). When a wicked man dieth, his expectation shall perish, and the hope of unjust men perisheth ... but to him that soweth righteousness shall be a sure reward" (11:7,18). "The lip of truth shall be established for ever: but a lying tongue is but for a moment" (12:19). "The righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and sinner" (11:31). "The house of the wicked shall be overthrown: but the tabernacle of the upright shall flourish" (14:11). "Whoso despiseth the word shall be destroyed but he that feareth the commandment shall be rewarded" (13:13). "As the whirlwind passeth, so is the wicked no more: but the righteous is an everlasting foundation ... The righteous shall never be removed: but the wicked shall not inhabit the earth" (10:25,30). "The upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it" (2:21,22).

It is an illustration of the unity that characterizes the oracles of God, that all these things should be appropriate to the table of the Lord around which we are assembled. There is no breach in the divine circle. Solomon is one with Christ, even as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, who will sit down together in the kingdom of God. The reason is that it is one God, who spake by them all. "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1). This makes all the difference between the wisdom of the Bible and the wisdom of "the wise" of this world. In the one is light and harmony; in the other, darkness on the highest problems. Let us walk in the light and rejoice in the light that we may be children of light, both now and in the glorious age to come.