30 Sayings for Wisdom - Part 2

10/30/16

Proverbs 22: 20-21

*“I have written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge, teaching you to be honest and to speak the truth…”*

This is the second installment of a three-part miniseries on wisdom, specifically on 30 bits of advice that Solomon has left us. A couple of weeks ago I began with sayings 11-20; today we will look at 1-10.

Some of this wisdom is easily recognizable; other sayings need some updating to make them usable to us.

Saying #1 begins in Proverbs 22: 22

#1 *Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not take away the rights of the needy in court, for the LORD will take up their case and will exact life for life.*

#2 (22:24) *Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn their ways and get yourself ensnared*.

#3 (22:26) *Don’t agree to guarantee another person’s debt or put up security for someone else. If you can’t pay it, even your bed will be snatched from under you.*

#4 (22:28) *Do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set*.

#5 (22:29) *Do you see someone skilled in their work? They will serve before kings; they will not serve before officials of low rank*.

#6 (23:1-3) *When you sit to dine with a ruler, note well what is before you, and put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony. Do not crave his delicacies, for that food is deceptive*.

#7 (23:4) Don’t wear yourself out trying to get rich. Be wise enough to know when to quit. In the blink of an eye wealth disappears, for it will sprout wings and fly away like an eagle.

#8 (23:6) *Don’t eat with people who are stingy; don’t desire their delicacies. They are always thinking about how much it costs. “Eat and drink,” they say, but they don’t mean it. You will throw up what little you’ve eaten, and your compliments will be wasted*.

#9 (23:9) *Don’t waste your breath on fools, for they will despise the wisest advice*.

#10 (23:10) *Don’t cheat your neighbor by moving the ancient boundary markers; don’t take the land of defenseless orphans. For their Redeemer is strong; he himself will bring their charges against you*.

In these verses Solomon is guiding us in our behavior and attitudes in various situations.

He suggests that we not take advantage of the poor, oppress them, or strip them of their rights. We all know this; it is why there are charities. It has been the entire mission of some people, such as Mother Theresa, and we recoil in horror at the people who try to use their advantage over the poor and homeless.

Most of what Solomon proposes has been absorbed by humanity as part of an unwritten moral code. But Proverbs provides a written code of ethics and behaviors that would help the world in many instances if we simply paid attention to them.

He proposes that we avoid befriending people with bad tempers, people who anger easily. I think for many of us this is a natural reaction: to stay away from people who seem unstable and act out their negative emotions with violent behavior and words.

The third wise saying sounds like something my father taught us: don’t guarantee someone else’s debt. Now I may be tempted by family, but even then, are we really helping them? Are we truly helping them get a start in life or are we enabling them, making them dependent and financially vulnerable because they haven’t learned how to save or we have denied them the benefits of delayed gratification?

Shakespeare has passed along this wisdom in his play Hamlet: “Neither a borrower or a lender be.” Although we can hardly exist in today’s world without financial assistance in one way or another, money matters continue to plague the lives of many people because of unwise decisions .

I find it interesting that Solomon mentions two sets of similar sounding counsels: two involving landmarks, and two involving eating dinner.

Regarding landmarks, this was a serious custom in those days – to established well marked boundaries by which lands, estates, and inheritances, were bounded and distinguished. These landmarks were set by ancestors in agreement with their neighbors; to remove them was unlawful, in fact a heinous crime, theft of great magnitude.

These landmarks also created property lines and by law and morality a person was not to encroach upon someone else’s field, even though the ancestors had long since passed away. People were to respect the property and land of others, and not reap their wheat, mow their grass, harvest their grains, or steal their cattle.

People were not to move the markers when no one was looking and increase the size of their personal land. Again, this was a heinous act; a severe fracture of the established moral code.

Then there is the mention of taking care with whom we dine. This can be expanded to apply to the people we want to be like, the people we want to spend time with … the people who we allow to influence our thinking and behaviors.

At first, he instructs us that when we dine with a ruler, or find ourselves in a situation that tempts us with esteem and worldly luxury, we must be aware of those temptations. This dinner invitation may cause us to live outside our reason, imbibe in excesses of eating, drinking, and speaking too freely of our opinions. This is what Solomon means by holding a knife to our throat – it means to avoid excess of gluttony and drunkenness. It means to practice restraint. When he says that the food is deceptive I understand it to mean that in some cases the luxurious food and drink may delight us, but they will not satisfy us. They please the eye and the palate but drain the body and disincline the soul.

Also pertaining to dining invitations, Solomon recommends that we avoid the stingy. Some people are disingenuous; they say one thing but think another. Some people are compliment predators; there are people like this: they will invite us to dinner, as a for instance, and wait for us to compliment them. Solomon says they invite us yet watch with disdain as we eat their food. Avoid such people; they cause indigestion of the soul and body.

In saying #5 Solomon mentions the quality of work that we provide is in direct proportion to the recognition and the audience that we attract. Provide high quality products and service, and you will be rewarded with a higher clientele.

Notice that he doesn’t say that those who charge more for their wares will attract a more discriminating patron, but those who are skilled in their area work. My Mom used to tell us, “If something is worth doing, it is worth doing well.” Perhaps this is the wisdom Solomon was passing along.

#7 Don’t wear yourself out trying to become rich. This is ancient wisdom that is echoed by the Christ. In Luke 12:15 Jesus says, “Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own.” In Timothy 6:9 we are told, “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and ruin.”

The final wisdom gem that Solomon offers from these initial ten is to not offer advice to fools – they won’t listen. Christ took this idea and retaught it as: Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. George Bernard Shaw told us, “I learned long ago, never wrestle with a pig. You get dirty, and besides, the pig likes it.” Today’s spin on this wisdom has become: Never try to teach a pig to sing. It wastes your time and annoys the pig.

Much of what Solomon taught has been absorbed by society and reworded to suit their social times. There is not much that is new after these 3000 years since Solomon. But we need reminders of what we know and what we have forgotten. We must remember that it is God who speaks through this advice because it was God who granted Solomon his wisdom.

The words may change, the situations may change, but the wisdom passed on by Solomon and Jesus, and the other Spirit-infused great ones like – Buddha, the Dalai Lama, Lao Tzu, Krishna, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, St. Paul, and the many others who over the years and even today – this wisdom is to be passed on and interpreted by our hearts and minds through the filter of the Christ.

It is my prayer that we be open to God’s wisdom as it comes to us from all Divine sources, and allow it to guide us, and influence our thinking, words, actions, attitudes, and beliefs.

Let us pray….