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November memory verse: **Philippians 4:13 (NKJV)**

¹³ I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

**Please join us for Thanksgiving Eve at 6:30
You will receive a blessing.**

Commentary on Proverbs 4 by, Chuck Smith, 11/22/20

Including How to Read Proverbs, by John Piper

Solomon continues talking to his son.

Hear, ye children, the instruction of a father, and attend that you might know understanding. For I give you good doctrine, don't forsake my law. For I was my father's son, tender and only beloved in the sight of my mother ([Pro 4:1-3](#)).

So Solomon now is speaking of his father David and of his mother Bathsheba. "Tender and beloved in the sight of his mother."

Now he taught me ([Pro 4:4](#))

Now this would be David, his father.

He taught me also, and said unto me, Let your heart retain my words: keep my commandments, and live. Now get wisdom, get understanding: forget it not; neither decline from the words of my mouth. Forsake her not, and she shall preserve thee: love her, and she will keep you. Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all of thy getting get understanding ([Pro 4:4-7](#)).

Now you know, there are certain people who have a lot of knowledge but they're fools. They don't know how to use their knowledge. They don't have wisdom. If there is to be a choice made between wisdom and knowledge, it's better to choose wisdom. It's like the mother who told her child, "Honey, when you don't got an education, you got to use your brains." And wisdom is really preferable to knowledge. For unless you have wisdom, knowledge can be dangerous. Knowledge can destroy. Wisdom is the principal thing,

which is actually the correct application of knowledge. It's knowing what to do with what you know. Understanding.

So here is David talking to Solomon. "Now look, son, wisdom is the principal thing. So get wisdom. And with all of your getting get understanding." Oh, to have an understanding heart. Oh, to have a heart that is filled with wisdom. Fear of the Lord, the beginning of wisdom, where it starts.

Concerning wisdom:

Exalt her, and she will promote you: she shall bring you to honor, when you do when you embrace her. She shall give to your head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory will she deliver to you. Hear, O my son ([Pro 4:8-10](#)),

It seems like Solomon picks it up here again.

receive my sayings; and the years of your life will be many. For I have taught you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in the right paths. When you go, your steps shall not be straitened; and when you run, you will not stumble. Take hold of instruction; [grip her] don't let her go: keep her; for she is your life. Enter not into the path of the wicked, do not go in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, run from it. For they sleep not, unless they have done some mischief; and their sleep is taken away, unless they've caused someone to fall. For they eat the bread of wickedness, and they drink the wine of violence. But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shines more and more unto the perfect day ([Pro 4:10-18](#)).

So here is the contrast. The wicked who go in darkness and who cannot sleep until they've done their mischief and so forth, in contrast to the path of the just, which is as a shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. Beautiful.

The way of the wicked is as darkness: they know not at what they stumble. My son, attend to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your eyes; keep them in the midst of your heart. For they are life to those that find them, and health to all their flesh. Keep your heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life ([Pro 4:19-23](#)).

Here, I think, is perhaps the key. Keeping our hearts with all diligence. Now the Bible speaks of the soul, the emotions of man, conscious level, but it speaks also of the heart of man, which is always considered one level deeper. "Out of the abundance of the heart," the scriptures said, "the mouth speaks" ([Matthew 12:34](#)). "It is not which goes into a man's mouth that defiles a man but that which comes out" ([Matthew 15:11](#)). Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. And out of the heart there issue you know all of these things. So the heart is considered as sort of the center of the volitional part of man, the will of man. There is a difference made in the scripture with the believing in your mind and the believing in your heart. "That if thou shall confess with thy mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord, and believe in your heart" ([Romans 10:9](#)). What you

believe in your heart affects the way you live, what you believe in your mind can pass by and have no effect upon the way you live. But when it's down deep within your heart, then there is the effect upon your life. We must keep our hearts with all diligence, because it is out of the heart that the issues of life spring forth.

Put away from you a froward mouth [a perverse mouth], perverse lips put far from thee. Let your eyes look straight ahead. Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established. Don't turn to the right or to the left: but remove your foot from evil ([Pro 4:24-27](#)).

How to Read Proverbs, by John Piper

Founder & Teacher, desiringGod.org

Why would a book that aims to impart insight for wise living ([Proverbs 1:2-3](#)) put contradictory instructions back to back? I can think of at least seven reasons.

Here's the situation:

The book of Proverbs does indeed aim to impart insight for wise living. Probably the most basic insight it offers is this:

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.
([Proverbs 3:5-6](#))

But how can we walk in straight paths if we are told to walk in contradictory ways? Isn't that the case in [Proverbs 26:4-5](#)?

Answer not a fool according to his folly,
lest you be like him yourself.
Answer a fool according to his folly,
lest he be wise in his own eyes.

So which is it? Do we answer a fool according to his folly? Or don't we? Why would the composer — let's call him the author — of the book of Proverbs put these contradictory exhortations back to back? What can we learn from this?

1. We learn that in the author's mind they are *not* contradictory.

Their meaning is not such that if one is true, the other can't ever be true. Neither *intention* nor *accident* can explain why these two exhortations would come back to back if they were really contradictory. They are too close to be an *accident* — as though the author would not recall in verse 5 what he had just said in verse 4! And if the *intention*

were to sneak in a contradiction, then putting the exhortations back to back is the worst way try to sneak it in. They virtually scream, “Here we are! Two seemingly contradictory instructions!”

If we treat the author the way we would like to be treated, we will surely conclude this: Strange as it sounds, he meant to do this. And he does not want us to be muddleheaded. His aim is to help us be wise, not confused. So in his mind, this is no contradiction. Something else is going on.

2. We learn from this strange juxtaposition the real nature of a proverb, and how to read this book.

If we give the author the benefit of the doubt — and assume he knows what he is doing — we will infer that he’s telling us that it’s okay for proverbs to sound contradictory. Why? Because the real nature of most proverbs is not a rule that is used the same way in all circumstances at all times.

Rather, a proverb is often a recommended way of acting that will be wise in some settings and not in others. Or: a general observation of experience that is very often true and useful, but not always true in every situation. The same act may be wise in one setting but foolish in another. The same fact may hold in one situation and not in another.

“All proverbs are true. But they are not always true in every situation. ”

For example, consider the two extrabiblical proverbs “a stitch in time saves nine” and “haste makes waste.” These are, on the face of it, contradictory. One says it’s wise to hurry. The other says it’s foolish to hurry. But they are not contradictory in the sense that if one is true, the other can’t be true. They are both true depending on the situation.

If you catch a water leak in the upstairs bathroom quickly, you will save yourself from having to replace the whole downstairs ceiling. But if you rush to finish the plumbing job by neglecting the right kind of soldering for the copper pipe, you may wake up to a ruined ceiling and a wasted \$2,000. Both proverbs are true — and very helpful in living a wise life.

The same is true of proverbs that state a fact, not just proverbs that call for an act: “absence makes the heart grow fonder” and “out of sight, out of mind.” Or “birds of a feather flock together” and “opposites attract.”

These are all true proverbs. But they are not always true in every situation. Well, then, how are we to know when to use them?

3. We learn that life is too complex to be lived by proverbs alone. We need wisdom to know how to use the proverbs.

When the author tells us, back to back, “Answer a fool according to his folly,” and, “Don’t answer a fool according to his folly,” he is teaching us that we need discernment about when to do the one and when to do the other.

If a sergeant tells his platoon to walk slowly and carefully, and also tells them to run like crazy, he expects them to know that sometimes they are navigating a minefield, and sometimes they are under fire in the open country. You store away both pieces of advice in your mind. Wisdom knows when to use the one and not the other. [Proverbs 25:11](#) puts it like this:

A word fitly spoken
is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

This means that a wonderfully wise proverb may be spoken in a way that is totally *unfitting* (not “fitly spoken”). It may be like, “Walk slowly and carefully,” when the bullets are pinging off your helmet. That’s the wrong proverb at the wrong time — not fitly spoken.

4. We learn, therefore, that proverbs alone do not make a fool wise.

Isn’t it remarkable that just two verses later, after our “contradictory” pair of proverbs, the author makes this very point? He says,

Like a lame man’s legs, which hang useless,
is a proverb in the mouth of fools.
([Proverbs 26:7](#))

Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard
is a proverb in the mouth of fools.
([Proverbs 26:9](#))

“A perfectly good proverb in the mouth of a fool does not make him wise.”

A perfectly good proverb in the mouth of a fool does not make him wise. It makes him useless at best (like legs that dangle), or dangerous at worst (like piercing the hand). Proverbs alone don’t make fools wise.

What does? A mixture of (1) storing up proverbs and other forms of revealed wisdom, (2) earnest meditation on them, (3) serious prayer for God’s help, and (4) a divine bestowment of the gift of wisdom.

I see those four things in [Proverbs 2:1–6](#):

My son, if you *receive my words*
and treasure up my commandments with you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom

and *inclining your heart to understanding*;
yes, if you *call out for insight*
and raise your voice for understanding,
if you seek it like silver
and search for it as for hidden treasures,
then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.
For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

Proverbs alone don't make you wise. You must be wise to use proverbs wisely — like apples of gold in a setting of silver, not like a thorn in the hand.

5. We learn that we should store up reasons why a proverb might be useful sometimes and not other times.

Notice the author gives us *reasons* for choosing one action or the other. “Answer not a fool according to his folly, *lest you be like him yourself*.” “Answer a fool according to his folly, *lest he be wise in his own eyes*.”

In other words, store up this truth: there are times when it will be pointless to answer a fool, *because it will only drag you into his folly*. It's best to just let him make a fool of himself and be discredited rather than ruining your own usefulness.

But also store up this truth: there are times when he is not just making a fool of himself, but also is drawing dozens, or thousands, into his folly so that he feels justified and wise in his foolish ideas. You need to step in and expose his vaunted wisdom as folly for the sake of others, and for his sake.

6. We learn that the divine mercy needed to become a person who can use proverbs wisely has always depended ultimately on Jesus's death for our sins.

“The path of wisdom is to be filled with the word of God, meditate on it, and pray for blood-bought help.”

If it weren't for God's free gift of wisdom ([Proverbs 2:6](#); [James 3:17](#)), we would all be trapped in sinful folly. This is why [Proverbs 3:5](#) tells us to trust in the Lord with all our hearts. But this mercy was blood-bought. Old Testament sacrifices foreshadowed the bloody payment. Jesus paid it. And Paul made clear in [Romans 3:25](#) that his payment covered the sins of Old Testament believers as well as ours.

So, when the author of Proverbs cries out for wisdom (2:1–6), and when New Testament saints cry out for wisdom ([Colossians 1:9](#)), we are all depending on divine mercy which we do not deserve. If we get it, it's because Jesus bought it.

7. Finally, we learn that the wisdom that knows how to use proverbs “fitly” is not automatic but grows with time, experience, and grace.

These “contradictory” proverbs ([Proverbs 26:4–5](#)) throw us back not on rule-keeping, but on God. And there, in dependence on his mercy, we learn that “the fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom” ([Proverbs 9:10](#)).

The *beginning*. Getting wisdom is a lifelong process.

For example, I learned from experience as a pastor that there are times in a church business meeting when a crotchety saint may take the microphone and begin to say unhelpful and foolish things. But you don’t answer him according to his folly, lest you get sucked into a vortex of irrationality. You know the man. And you discern that the people can see through this little rant. And you let it die out in its own smoke.

But there are other times when a more articulate, but no less misguided and foolish, person begins to mislead significant numbers with foolish and uninformed opinions. This time you discern that he must be answered according to his folly, lest his apparent wisdom and persuasiveness carry people into his error.

Life brings hundreds of such experiences our way. The path of wisdom is to be filled with the word of God, meditate on its possible uses, pray for blood-bought help, trust God at every turn, and then humbly choose which part of the “contradiction” we will put into action — knowing our Lord never contradicts himself.