

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Proverbs

I. Overview – The *Proverbs* are a compilation of “sayings” and “instructions” written by King Solomon, “sages / wise ones,” the officials of King Hezekiah, Agur, and King Lemuel (and wisdom credited to Lemuel’s mother). *Proverbs* belongs to the biblical wisdom literature (*Job*, *Psalms*, *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Song of Songs*) and is concerned with the discipline of living well. Its sayings emerge from **androcentric** (refer to your glossary of terms) interests: the imagined speaker is often an older male sage or scribe instructing a younger male (likely a teenager). So, even when women appear prominently (e.g., as Lady “Wisdom,” Lady “Folly,” the “Strange Woman,” and the “Woman of Strength”) the rhetoric is shaped by patriarchal social assumptions. *Proverbs* should NOT be flattened into a manual of settled answers as it **often refuses to resolve every tension and preserves counter-testimonies** that keep the reader from mistaking a proverb for a guarantee or a moral pattern of certainty.

- A. The “fear of the Lord” is a recurring theme (e.g., **Prov. 1:7** “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge”). Is it “fear” or “awe”? The phrase “fear of the LORD” is a technical expression in Israelite wisdom literature. It refers not primarily to terror but to a posture that includes reverence, awe, and humility.

II. The 3 Worlds

A. World BEHIND The Text - *Proverbs* (c. 1,000 BCE) reflects a wider **Ancient Near Eastern** wisdom tradition rather than emerging in isolation. Its closest literary parallel is the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope* (c. 1,200 BCE) especially in **Prov. 22:17–24:22** (refer below). *Proverbs* also carries similarities with the Sumerian / Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2100 BCE) as they both wrestle with mortality, limits, friendship, reputation, human achievement, and the call to enjoy ordinary life in the face of death. These similarities show Israelite wisdom adapting older ANE wisdom patterns into its own theological and ethical framework.

1. Comparisons with the *Instruction of Amenemope*

- a. **Angry People** – **Prov. 22:24–25** “Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person...”
Amenemope (Ch. 11) Avoid the heated man; don't associate with him because his behavior will affect you.
- b. **Boundary Stones** – **Prov. 22:28** “Do not move an ancient boundary stone...” **Amenemope (Ch. 7)** Do not remove the markers that define another person's land.
- c. **The Poor** – **Prov. 22:22–23** “Do not rob the poor... for the LORD will plead their cause.”
Amenemope (Ch. 2) Do not exploit the poor; the god will hear their cry and judge the oppressor.
- d. **Wealth** – **Prov. 23:4–5** “...riches certainly make themselves wings...” **Amenemope (Ch. 9)** Wealth does not remain; it makes itself wings like geese and flies away.
- e. **Guarding the Heart** – **Prov. 4:23** “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” **Amenemope (Ch. 7)** Do not let your heart go straying.

B. World OF The Text - Many biblical scholars argue that *Proverbs* is intentionally **polyphonic** (refer to glossary of terms)—it contains diverse voices that require discernment. The juxtaposition of **Proverbs 26:4–5** (below in section III) is the clearest example, signaling that wisdom is NOT merely following rules but perceiving what faithfulness requires in a

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particular situation. Rather than flattening these perspectives into a single system, the wisdom tradition invites readers to live faithfully amid complexity, trusting that wisdom involves discernment as much as certainty.

C. World IN FRONT Of The Text - *Proverbs* repeatedly condemns the exploitation of the poor (22:22–23; 14:31; 17:5; 19:17), dishonest economic practices (11:1; 16:11; 20:10; 20:23), corrupt leadership (16:12; 29:2; 29:4; 28:15–16), and partiality in judgment (18:5; 24:23–25; 28:21), while calling for integrity (10:9; 11:3; 19:1; 28:6), generosity (11:24–25; 19:17; 22:9; 28:27), and the defense of the vulnerable (22:22–23; 23:10–11; 31:8–9). In a postmodern world marked by systemic inequality, racial injustice, economic disparity, and environmental degradation, these teachings challenge readers to move **beyond individual morality and toward practices that promote human dignity and the common good.**

III. Textual Tensions

<u>Tension</u>	<u>Verse(s)</u>	<u>Contradiction</u>
Answering fools	Prov. 26:4–5	“Do not answer fools according to their folly” vs. “Answer fools <u>according to their folly.</u> ”
Wealth as blessing / wealth as danger	Prov. 10:22; 13:11; 14:24; 22:4 vs. 11:4; 11:28; 23:4–5; 28:6	Wealth can be described as a blessing or result of diligence, but also as unreliable, morally dangerous, and <u>inferior to righteousness.</u>
The righteous prosper / the righteous suffer	Prov. 10:3; 10:24–25; 11:8; 12:21; 13:21; 14:11 vs. Proverbs 24:16; 28:10; 29:10	<i>Proverbs</i> often presents righteousness as leading to security, but also acknowledges that the righteous may fall, be opposed, or become targets of <u>the wicked.</u>
Hard work guarantees success / success is not fully controllable	Prov. 10:4; 12:11; 13:4; 14:23; 21:5 vs. 16:1; 16:9; 19:21; 21:31	Diligence is praised as productive, yet human planning is limited by divine sovereignty and circumstances beyond <u>human control.</u>
Speech is necessary / silence is wise	Prov. 10:11; 10:20–21; 15:23; 16:24; 25:11 vs. 10:19; 11:12; 17:27–28; 21:23	Wise speech gives life, healing, and timely counsel, yet restraint and <u>silence are also signs of wisdom.</u>
Rebuke is wise / rebuke can be dangerous	Prov. 9:8–9; 13:18; 15:31–32; 27:5–6 vs. 9:7; 23:9; 26:4	<i>Proverbs</i> commends correction, but warns that correcting mockers or fools <u>may bring abuse or waste effort.</u>
Humility brings honor / bold public honor is commended	Prov. 15:33; 18:12; 22:4; 25:6–7 vs. 27:2; 31:31	<i>Proverbs</i> praises humility and warns against self-promotion, yet also says public praise and honor may rightly be <u>given.</u>

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<u>Tension</u>	<u>Verse(s)</u>	<u>Contradiction</u>
Women as wisdom / women as danger	Prov. 1:20–33; 3:13–18; 8:1–36; 31:10–31 vs. 2:16–19; 5:3–14; 7:6–27; 21:9; 21:19; 25:24; 27:15–16	Female imagery can represent divine-like wisdom and social strength, but women are also often framed as sexual, domestic, or dangers within the book's <u>androcentric rhetoric</u> .
Children must be disciplined / discipline can be morally complex	Prov. 13:24; 22:15; 23:13–14; 29:15, 17 vs. Proverbs 19:18	<i>Proverbs</i> strongly endorses discipline, yet also warns against discipline that <u>becomes destructive or excessive</u> .
Kings are agents of justice / kings can be dangerous	Prov. 16:10–15; 20:8, 26; 21:1; 29:14 vs. 16:12; 17:7; 19:10; 28:15–16; 29:4	Kings are ideally servants of justice, but <i>Proverbs</i> also recognizes corrupt, <u>violent, foolish, or oppressive rulers</u> .
The poor are blamed / the poor are defended	Prov. 10:4; 13:18; 20:13; 24:33–34 vs. 14:31; 17:5; 19:17; 22:22–23; 28:27; 29:7	Poverty is sometimes linked to a lack of discipline, but elsewhere the poor are protected, and oppressing them is <u>condemned</u> .

IV. The Virtuous Woman – Prov. 31:10–31 is the concluding portrait of *Proverbs* and summarizes the book's vision of wisdom in lived practice. It also exposes the gendered expectations through which that vision was expressed in the patriarchal world of ancient Israel.

The Virtuous Woman is a contested text whose enduring significance lies not only in what it affirms but also in **what it reveals about the patriarchal social world from which it emerged**. While the poem celebrates the woman's intelligence, economic competence, resilience, generosity, and leadership, **these qualities remain largely directed toward the prosperity, honor, and stability of her household, particularly her husband**, reflecting a cultural system in which women's identities were often defined in relation to male authority. A justice-oriented / feminist hermeneutic exposes the ways in which idealized models of womanhood can reinforce **unrealistic expectations**. At the same time, the woman's remarkable agency, business acumen, and public influence provide resources for reimagining gender beyond the limitations of the ancient patriarchal framework. Thus, **Prov. 31:10–31** functions both as a witness to the gendered realities of its historical context and as a catalyst for ongoing conversations about equality, justice, dignity, and the full participation of women in every sphere of society.

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