

Text: Pr 1.1-7

We know that there are many commands (laws) in the Old Testament. Jewish scholars determined there were 613 of them. (I have no idea.)

We often think the Law is OT and there is no law in the NT. However, the NT includes many commandments, usually in the form of imperative verbs (with a few extra in the subjunctives).

We are going to compare commandments with proverbs today. I want to begin a study of the Book of Proverbs, but first we need to understand what a proverb is, and what wisdom is.

*Distinguishing Commands from Proverbs**an introduction to Wisdom*

In a search on imperatives in the New Testament, I found 579 from Romans to Jude. Closer study would find some that we don't think of as "laws" or "commands" in a strict sense, but here are some examples:

Phil 2.14 ¶ Do all things without grumbling or disputing;

Ep 4.28 He who steals must steal no longer ...

Jas 4.11 ¶ Do not speak against one another, brethren. ...

Commandments like these are straightforward, they tell you what to do or what not to do.

Proverbs are different from commandments, they sometimes sound as exacting as a commandment, but they mean to give insight not orders.

Read Prov 1.1-7

I. What is a Proverb?

A. We recognize distinct genres of literature by certain characteristics

1. Fiction / Non-fiction
2. Prose / Poetry
3. Reference works / Narratives
4. Songs / Sagas
5. Cookbooks / Concordances

What type of literature is this?

- “Once upon a time...”
- “An oak tree, though it is very large, began its life as an acorn.”
- “Mighty oaks from little acorns grow.”

B. Characteristics of Proverbs

1. A proverb is brief

- a. Usually less than 25 words
- b. Artistic attempt to say as much wisdom with as little words as possible
- c. Memorable: brevity, word play, etc.

“Like father, like son.” (Occurs in almost every language in the world.)

“As is the mother, so is her daughter.” Ezek 16.44

2. A proverb is concrete

- a. “Like father, like son.” – easily imagined concrete image
- b. “He’s a chip off the old block.” – same idea, different concrete image
- c. Most proverbs begin in some concrete aspect of life.
 - 1) 1 Sam 10, Saul unexpectedly prophecies when meeting a band of prophets
 - 2) “Is Saul among the prophets?”
 - 3) Became a proverb: meant someone was acting out of character.

3. A proverb is a general truth

- a. “Like father, like son”
 - 1) Generally, sons look physically like their fathers
 - 2) Even more generally, sons *act* like their fathers
- b. Sometimes a proverb does not apply
 - 1) A son may not look or act like his father at all
 - 2) This does not destroy the general truth of the proverb

4. Proverbs have diverse applications

- a. "Like father, like son" can be applied to things other than fathers and sons
- b. "Like teacher, like pupil"
- c. "Like pastor, like people"
- d. "Like coach, like athlete"

In each of these last three, you could say "like father, like son" about each of these types of relationships and convey the same meaning.

C. Confusion about Proverbs

"A proverb ... comes to express a general rule through a specific example."¹

1. A proverb is not a law.

- a. Common interpretive mistake by Christians
- b. "Some Christians read the proverbs as if they were inflexible laws of God's creation, admitting no exceptions."²

Notice Proverbs 26.4-5

Pr 26.4-5 Do not answer a fool according to his folly, Or you will also be like him.⁵ Answer a fool as his folly *deserves*, That he not be wise in his own eyes.

- c. The Proverbs of Solomon are not intended to be taken as laws.

2. A proverb is not a promise.

- a. "Because the proverbs of Solomon are Scripture, it is supposed that God himself will guarantee the performance of every proverb."³
- b. Some will "claim" a proverb in prayer, just as they will a promise.

¹ William Mouser, *Walking in Wisdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 13.

² Mouser, 13.

³ Mouser, 14.

- c. If the exception to the proverb occurs, some are extremely disappointed in God.

Often occurs with proverbs about child rearing.

3. A definition

“A proverb is a compressed statement of wisdom, artfully crafted to be striking, thought-provoking, memorable, and practical.”⁴

II. The general outline of Proverbs

A. The title: Proverbs 1.1: “The Proverbs of Solomon ... King of Israel”

1. But notice Proverbs 10.1
2. Next notice Prov 22.17
3. And 24.23
4. And 25.1
5. And 30.1
6. And 31.1

It appears that the book is divided into sections by these markers.

B. The basic sections of Proverbs

1. The exhortations of a father concerning wisdom (Prov 1-9)
2. The Proverbs of Solomon (Prov 10.1-22.16)
3. The Words of the Wise (Prov 22.17-24.22)
4. Further Words of the Wise (Prov 24.23-34)
5. Further Proverbs of Solomon (Prov 25-29 [collected by the men of Hezekiah])
6. The Words of Agur (Prov 30)
7. The Words of Lemuel (Prov 31)

⁴ Dan Phillips, *God's Wisdom in Proverbs* (Kress Christian Publications, 2011), 23.

C. A simpler division

1. Meditations on Wisdom (Prov 1-9)
2. Proverbs Proper (Prov 10-30)
3. Wisdom Idealized (Prov 31)

III. What is wisdom?

A. Wisdom is discerning the deeper principles behind God's commands

1. The place of the law in God's eyes (Mt 5.17-20)
2. Examples of filling the law up fully (fulfilling the law)
 - a. Thou shalt not kill → Don't hate (Mt 5.21-26)
 - b. Thou shalt not commit adultery → Don't look (Mt 5.27-32)
 - c. Thou shalt not make false vows → Don't swear at all (Mt 5.33-37)
 - d. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth → Turn the other cheek (Mt 5.38-42)
 - e. Love your neighbour [hate your enemy] → Love your enemies

B. God's wisdom is available in almost every book of the Bible, but it is in very "crystallized" form in the book of Proverbs

Eph 5:17 Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. [KJV]

Ep 5:17 So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Conclusion:

“True religion is not just a creed: it is a way of life. A saving relationship with God affects every aspect of life. Proverbs is a book that defines how religion touches life by forcing religion into where we live. It demonstrates that a living relationship to God is the foundation for life and experience. As a guide to proper behavior, Proverbs maps the way for believers who are seeking to please God by being conformed to His will. Its wisdom is practical morality — the skill to perform the will of God.

“In theological terms, Proverbs is the “how to” book of sanctification. Sanctification is simply doing the holy will of God. It is that ongoing process in the life of every believer whereby he increasingly dies to sin and lives to righteousness on the basis of God’s gracious regeneration and justification. Pleasing God is not a hit or miss proposition. God has made it clear in the revelation of His moral law exactly what He requires: total love for God and self-like love for one another. That unchanging law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, is the absolute standard for holiness. Whereas the mores of society constantly change, the standard of holiness never changes.

“It is not surprising, then, that Proverbs, this book of practical morality and ethics, moves within [the] sphere of the moral law of God. All of the pithy aphorisms are specific applications of the Ten Commandments. To implement the principles of Proverbs is to obey God’s Law and consequently to please Him. Prerequisite to obeying God in a way that pleases Him is fearing Him. Fearing God requires knowing God. Proverbs puts things in the proper order: saving faith precedes sanctification. That is good theology.”⁵

⁵ “Editorial,” *Biblical Viewpoint: Focus on Proverbs* 23, no. 2 (November 1999): iii [emphasis mine].