

Wisdom A Choice (Proverbs 10)

We are bombarded with pithy little sayings put together by advertising agencies that want to make us better consumers. Isn't it better to listen to pithy little sayings written to make us better people? That's where Proverbs comes in...

What do you desire? Why do you desire it?

An Old Testament scholar went to speak about the book of Proverbs at a church in Beverly Hills, California. She wasn't expecting there to be many people there or much enthusiasm for the topic. Yet she was pleasantly surprised to discover a large enthusiastic audience.

Talking to one of the participants, she asked why there was such enthusiasm. The response was:

"Oh, most of us work in Hollywood. We write commercial and advertising copy. And when we were in training, they told us to read Proverbs... But now I see that most of what we write is aimed at the people Proverbs calls, 'fools'."

The book of Proverbs is full of short pithy and memorable sayings that want to make a point and persuade us to live a certain way. The world of advertising is pretty similar. Except rather than teaching us wisdom they generally work to persuade us that true happiness comes from buying their stuff!

Expedia advert:

One recent advert, for Expedia seeks to question this messaging from the advertising industry. It features Ewan McGregor walking through studios creating adverts. As he does so he gives a short speech which is remarkably similar in style to the sayings in the book of Proverbs:

"I doubt any of us would look back on our lives and think,
I wish I'd got a slightly sportier SUV
Or bought an even thinner TV
Or found a trendier scent
I wish I'd discovered a crunchier crisp
Found a lighter light beer,
Or had an even smarter smart phone.

"Do you think any of us will look back on our lives and regret
the things we didn't buy
or the places we didn't go?"

The last part in particular is similar to the Proverbs and works in a very similar way. It is all about promoting:

A Desire: 'To Go on holiday' - something that will bring you happiness and joy.

A Choice: between 'buying stuff' and 'going on holiday,' with the implication that 'going on holiday' is the better choice.

And also a Perspective: He wants you to imagine that you are looking back on your life and deciding what was the thing you had most wish to have done. The underlying philosophy is life is all about enjoying what you can while you can. It is the 'bucket list' perspective, what are the things you want to do before you die.

Of course although the advert is set up to mock advertising that tries to make you buy stuff, it is really trying to achieve a very similar aim, it wants you to buy holidays!

We are constantly bombarded by these advertising proverbs, but what we so easily forget is that they are not designed to make us better people, but better consumers. They don't want to help us live good lives, but to spend our money.

The Proverbs in the Bible may not be performed by great actors like Ewan McGregor, accompanied by great cinematography and amazing music, but they will do you much more good - if you'll take the time to read and reflect on them.

In fact in contrast to adverts, Biblical Proverbs come from a very different perspective, offer an alternative and more fundamental choice and want to create a very different desire and delight within us.

The Perspective of Proverbs:

The Expedia advert implies that what really matters in life is having great experiences through visiting lovely places. The best holiday I have been on was to visit my sister in Vietnam. The beaches were truly stunning and it was wonderful to experience something of a very different culture. Yet, I remember reflecting at one point on the holiday, that as wonderful a place as this was, that what made the holiday really good was being part of a happy family.

It's not stuff or holidays that really matter, but relationships and especially our family relationships. This is where wisdom really begins to matter. The first of Proverbs proper starts:

"A wise son brings joy to his father,
but a foolish son grief to his mother." (10:1)

When we learn wisdom, we bring joy and happiness to the family and community around us. This is one part of an important perspective of Proverbs. Life is not about amassing great experiences, but helping to enable great families and communities.

In fact the whole book is rooted in the perspective of ordinary family life. Back in chapter 1, it is couched as instructions from a father to a son:

"Listen, my son, to your father's instruction
and do not forsake your mother's teaching" (1:8)

Yet, that is not the only important and distinctive perspective in Proverbs. The verse before says:

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction." (1:7)

Behind the family setting, is a relationship with God, that acknowledges him as our Creator who wants the best for us. True wisdom comes from living in fear of him.

This perspective is not obvious in every Proverb, but it is always there and sometimes obviously so. In the Proverbs we had read it says:

"The fear of the LORD adds length to life,
but the years of the wicked are cut short."
(10:27)

"The way of the LORD is a refuge for the righteous,

but it is the ruin of those who do evil." (10:29)

Biblical Proverbs give a very different perspective to the Proverbs of adverts. They promote the importance of interpersonal relationships and even more fundamentally, they take God seriously rather than ignoring him completely.

Spiritual Perspective for Everyday Life:

Yet, in bringing this new perspective like adverts, they remain rooted in the everyday life.

Just look at the topics covered in Proverbs 10:

- Happy families (10:1)
- Wealth and poverty (10:4)
- Attitudes to work (10:5)
- Education (10:14)
- Communication (10:11)

Proverbs reminds us that our everyday decisions are fundamentally effected by our relationship with God. If our faith is just about doing spiritual things for the sake of our souls, then it is not a truly Biblical or Christian faith. No the fear of God should impact every aspect of our lives. Proverbs is a great aid in helping us see how!

The Choice of Proverbs:

So, like adverts, Proverbs sets things in a perspective. They also offer us a choice.

Most of the Proverbs we read offer contrast. Notice, the word, 'but' appears in the middle of nearly all of them. In fact this is very common in the early chapters of Proverbs. In chapters 10-15, 163 out of 183 sayings are contrasts!

In chapter 10 they contrast a number of different things:

- Riches and Poverty
- Laziness and Diligence
- Hatred and Love

The main contrasts, however, are between the wise and the foolish and the righteous and the wicked.

How are we to understand this. Do we see the world in this black and white way, everyone is either wise or foolish or righteous or wicked? The truth is that most of us are wise some of the time and foolish some of the time. It's not that straightforward.

But the Proverbs are not set up to help us label people, but to see the choices we face day by day. The wise and the foolish are not two distinct groups of people, but rather two distinct choices that each of us may make at any moment.

The same can be said for the righteous and the wicked. In fact the point of many of the Proverbs in chapter 10 is to highlight the choice we often face between righteousness and wickedness. They want to persuade us that choosing righteousness is the wise choice.

Righteousness is of course closely associated with the fear of the LORD and so wisdom. It means as those who are saved by faith in Christ, we desire to live the way God shows us. As disciples of Christ we want to be obedient to all he and God commands.

To choose righteousness, to obey God is wise, because it leads to better outcomes. That is the thrust of many of these Proverbs.

First of all look at what righteousness brings:

Life - 10:2
Blessed by others 10:6, 7
Safety, Security 10:9

Success - 10:24
Joy - 10:28

In contrast look at what wickedness brings:

Wealth, but with no lasting value - 10:2
Cursed by others - 10:6, 7
Punishment - 10:9

Overtaken by what you dread - 10:24
Failed dreams - 10:28

When you put the choice like this clearly, righteousness is the right way to go! To misquote Ewan McGregor from *Trainspotting*, choose 'Righteousness, choose life!'

But, people don't really believe the Proverbs, because they do not ultimately have the same perspective or faith as the writer of Proverbs. They don't believe in or take seriously the God who created them and made them. They think they can go their own way, that life is about making the most of the now before you die. Such an attitude is fed by modern adverts, but is nothing new. It is the 'bucket list' perspective.

Yet, they will also often point to what seems to be the experience of life around them. Aren't there many examples of the wicked who are wealthy, healthy and strong?

Objection: Is this always true?

In fact the rest of the Bible contains a number of places that seem to question what at first glance seems to be the simplistic attitude of the Proverbs.

Yet, even Proverbs is not quite that simplistic. It accepts that people will become rich through wickedness and that the wicked will be around for a while:

"Ill-gotten treasures are of no value,
but righteousness delivers from death." (10:2)

"When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone,
but the righteous stand firm for ever." (10:25)

It envisages that the wicked may be successful for a time, but that their ultimate fate is to lose everything. This is the perspective that belief in God as the ultimate true judge brings.

It is also the perspective that comes from following Jesus. After all Jesus more than anyone else was the 'Righteous-one.' When he was baptised, God the Father declares: "This is my Son

with whom I am well pleased" which can perhaps be seen as a Trinitarian form of 10:1: 'A wise son brings joy to his father.' It certainly shows that he was the 'Righteous -one.'

Yet, despite this he faced the terrible death of crucifixion. If you stopped the story on Good Friday it would contradict all that Proverbs is teaching here. But the story did not end there. Jesus faced the storm of the cross and his death and burial and yet still, God brought him through to life in the resurrection, so that he will indeed stand firm for ever.

The basic gospel narrative shows us that in the short term, these Proverbs can seem to be wrong, but in the eternal perspective, God will ultimately bring life to those who choose righteousness, to those who trust in and live for him.

In fact the gospel also reminds us that even if you've been choosing wickedness your whole life, God still offers you the chance to change track and choose righteousness and so to choose life.

The Desire Promoted by Proverbs

So what about desire and joy?

The choice to follow righteousness rather than wickedness is often presented as a choice to abandon pleasure and joy for something serious and boring. Yet, this is the attitude of the fool:

"A fool finds pleasure in evil conduct..." (10:23a)

Yet, to challenge that belief the Proverb goes on:

"but a man of understanding delights in wisdom." (10:23b)

In fact, seeking righteousness is just as much about desiring to have joy and happiness in life as those who seek that in drugs, sex, wealth, stuff or going on holiday. The difference is that such a choice in life will be ultimately more successful.

As 10:28 says:

"The prospect of the righteous is joy,
but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing." (10:28)

Like any advertising campaign, Proverbs through its carefully crafted slogans wants to create in us a desire, but not a desire to spend our money on things that offer temporary pleasure, but a desire for righteous living and wisdom. It's not a choice to give up on happiness for righteousness, but to discover that righteousness is the only true root to happiness, the only way that will truly succeed.

As Jesus says,

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." (Matthew 5:6)

So what will you choose?

So will you choose wisdom and righteousness? Will you take on the perspective that is framed by the fear of the LORD? If so then that should begin to show itself in our day to day lives.

As we study the Proverbs, they can help us desire such wisdom and righteousness more and more. Why not decide to take one Proverb a day and perhaps learn it off by heart or meditate on it through the day. See if bit by bit your outlook, desires and choices change.

And perhaps as you grow in wisdom, you may bring greater joy to both your earthly fathers and your father in heaven.