

A Heart for Wisdom (Proverbs 23:12-25)

Proverbs are written to help form a wise character. In this talk we consider two things to embrace and two things to avoid as we seek a wise character formation.

Character Formation - Why it matters 23:23, 15

As we saw last week, Proverbs is a book full of short sayings, that are designed to persuade us to choose the best ways to live.

Yet, more than just seeking to help us choose the right ways, they want to shape us into the right people. The first verse that was read today says:

"Apply your heart to instruction
and your ears to words of knowledge." (23:12)

In other words, the Proverbs are there to train our hearts.

Now if you want a good job, then you go to school and university or college in order to train your mind, so that you are able to take on challenging tasks.

If you want to be an elite athlete or sports person, then you train your body so that it is fit and strong enough to take on the challenging of competing at a high level.

If you want to be a successful singer, then you train your voice so that you can sing in tune and expressively no matter how difficult the music is.

Proverbs claim to be there not to train our mind or our body or our voice, but our heart. Now when the Bible talks about our heart it is not talking about our feelings or emotions, or about our romantic love. It is talking about the control centre of our self, the part of our body which sets our direction and way of life. Perhaps the English word that comes closest is the word, 'character.' When it says, 'apply your heart to instruction', it is talking about our character formation.

And the kind of character we have is so important. Proverbs want us to avoid ending up with a foolish character and to develop a wise character. And this matters, because a wise character will seek to live a righteous life, which we saw last week is a life that leads to ultimate joy.

So, this training is worth investing in:

"Buy truth and do not sell,
wisdom, discipline and understanding." (23:23)

We should want it for our children:

"My son, if your heart is wise,
then my heart will be glad;" (23:15)

And we should want it so that we can be like Jesus:

"And the child grew and became strong;
he was filled with wisdom,
and the grace of God was upon him." (Luke 2:40)

So how can we gain this kind of character formation for ourselves and our children? These verses can give us some pointers. I want to show us two things to embrace and two things to avoid.

Character Formation - Embrace Instruction - 23:12

Firstly, lets return to that initial verse:

"Apply your heart to instruction
and your ears to words of knowledge." (23:12)

You can only grow in wisdom if you embrace instruction, if you listen. Yet, we live in a world, where we have so many sources of advice and instruction. Who should we listen to?

Not your own

Firstly, it is important that we do not just listen to ourselves or our own opinions:

"The way of a fool seems right to him,
but a wise man listens to advice." (12:15)

Sadly, I think this is where so many people fall down. They think they already know best, they assume that their views are the correct ones. So many people are happy to tell you what they think, but seem totally uninterested in what you think.

Today this is a massive block to so many to hearing the good news about Jesus. People have already made up their minds about Jesus, faith or whatever and they are not interested in hearing anything that disagrees with them.

Social Media does not help. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, will not help you with your character formation. They are designed to feed you only with the points of views of people you already agree with.

Your character will never move towards wisdom, if you already think you know it all.

Many Counsellors

Actually, what we really need is as diverse a mix of advisers or counsellors as possible.

"Plans fail for lack of counsel,
but with many advisers they succeed." (15:22)

It is good to listen to people you might disagree with, they may have insights that you have not thought about. The more advice you can receive the more likely you are to properly understand the situation and make the right decision.

This section of Proverbs is called, the 'Sayings of the wise'

It is introduced in 22:17:

"The words of the wise:
Incline your ear and hear my words,
and apply your mind to my teaching;" (22:17, NRSV)

It actually bears many resemblances to a similar collection written at the time of Solomon, by an Egyptian called, *Amenemopet*. Some of the sayings are exactly the same. It seems that the writers of the Bible are not afraid to find wisdom in sources outside of the people of God. As Christians we should not be afraid to listen to wisdom from the non-Christian world around us.

Yet, we do not just accept everything the world says. These sayings are not exactly the same as the 30 sayings of *Amenemopet*. The Biblical writers have selected and weighed them against the framework of Proverbs.

Parents and God

Because ultimately, Proverbs says, along with the rest of the Bible, that the best character formation comes from listening to our parents and to God and especially to our parents, when they have listened to God!

For the Proverbs are foundationally rooted in the fear of the LORD, trusting that he knows best and that following his ways is the best way to live:

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." (9:10)

Character Formation - Embrace Discipline - vs. 13-14

So, character formation means embracing instruction and advice from others and especially our parents and God, but it also comes from discipline. This is where maybe it gets controversial! Look at verse 13-14.

"Do not withhold discipline from a child;
if you punish him with the rod, he will not die.
Punish him with the rod
and save his soul from death." (23:13-14)

Firstly, of course this raises the question as to whether corporal punishment, that is using physical violence to punish a child is appropriate. Over recent years our society has moved away from corporal punishment within schools and in most homes. That is a new development, which is not necessarily a bad thing. It is perfectly possible to punish children without violence and it probably helps create a less violent world.

However, the context of the world that Proverbs was written in was that parental discipline would have assumed the use of a rod for some kind of corporal punishment.

There are two other important issues around discipline we need to address.

Firstly, we need to distinguish between discipline and abuse.

Discipline means punishing the child for their ultimate good. It is about character formation. That is clearly the idea in Proverbs. It will be upsetting for the child, but it will not cause them permanent harm, rather it aims to form a character within them that will cause them to follow the ways of life and avoid destructive ways.

A basic example of this is if a child runs into the road without looking, a good parent will tell the child off, because they want to make sure they don't run into the road and so get run over and killed. Discipline is an important part of parenting, it is a sign of a parents love for the child.

Abuse is different. Abuse means punishing the child or whoever, either as an expression of your uncontrolled anger or in order to control them for your own benefit or sense of power.

Punishment done with this kind of attitude is not an expression of love and does more harm than good. It is certainly not the kind of behaviour commended here or anywhere in the Bible.

Secondly, some people and parents are wary of disciplining children or other people for fear of damaging their self-esteem. I think this can depend on the foundation of your self-esteem.

If your self-esteem is fundamentally rooted in the idea that you are basically a wonderful person, then any criticism or discipline for doing wrong will feel like an attack on that basic idea. This form of self-esteem is fragile and resistant to discipline and criticism.

But, if your self-esteem is rooted in the unconditional love of others, then you will be able to accept criticism and discipline, because it will not damage your self-esteem. This will free you to grow as a person to develop a wise character that hears and learns from criticism and discipline.

And this ability to accept discipline and criticism is really important to character formation:

"He who ignores discipline despises himself,
but whoever heeds correction gains understanding." (15:32)

So, where is your self-esteem rooted. Is it founded on a belief that you are basically wonderful, or a belief that you are unconditionally loved? If we want to grow as people, we need to root our self-esteem in the latter.

And that is in a sense what it means to become a Christian. We accept that God loves us so much he sent his Son to die for us. This is the foundation of our value and self-worth. So we are able to accept his discipline to become more like the kind of people he wants us to be, we become, disciples.

Character Formation - Avoid Envy - vs. 17-18

So, character formation means embracing instruction and embracing discipline.

More quickly, it also means avoiding some things.

The first thing we are to avoid is envy:

"Do not let your heart envy sinners,
but always be zealous for the fear of the LORD.
There is surely a future hope for you,
and your hope will not be cut off." (23:17-18)

- *Two Problems: Driven by Competition or Despair*
Envy is when we look at others and feel that they are doing better than us. This has two dangers. Either our motive in life will be to seek to compete with them and in some way beat them. This is not a wise driving force in life, it could lead us to behave in foolish ways.

Alternatively, it may lead us to despair and think that following God's way is a waste of time and so mean that we give up on following him and so move away from a wise character and possibly into silly behaviour.

- *Two Anti-dotes:*

There are however, two anti-dotes given. The first is 'fear of the LORD.' In other words stop fearing being second best, but rather fear not living as God wants. This is the way to grow in wisdom to form a good character.

The second is hope. Sometimes it looks as though the wicked are doing better than us now, but we need to have the long-term view. God will bless you with eternal life and treasures in heaven, if only you stick with him, whereas the wicked will be cut off.

Don't let envy destroy your character formation.

Character Formation - Avoid Excessive Party-goers - vs. 20-21

The second thing to avoid is hanging out with 'Excessive party-goers':

"Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags." (23:20-21)

- *Not parties altogether*

Now this is not saying we should never drink alcohol or eat meat. The phrase, 'too much' is here. It is not saying partying in itself is wrong. It can be good to attend parties in order to build relationships with others. After all this is what Jesus did:

"The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners".' But wisdom is proved right by her actions." (Matthew 11:19)

- *The warning*

The warning I think is to avoid hanging out with people for whom partying is their main and regular focus in life. If we are sucked into their attitude and lifestyle, it will corrupt our character, make us focus on just having a 'good time' and leave us unable to lead productive and good lives. Once again it takes our hearts to a different place from fearing God.

Paul has a warning about this in Philippians:

"For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. **Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame.** Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ," (Proverbs 3:18-20)

Wisdom finds its ultimate joy not in partying, but in our eternal hope.

Wise Hearts, Wise Words - vs. 16

So are you serious about character formation?

Are you concerned about your own character formation and that of your children?

Will you embrace instruction and discipline and avoid envy and excessive party-goers and other things that will lead you away from finding true joy in following God.

When we do that we will bring joy to others.

"My son, if your heart is wise,

then my heart will be glad;
my inmost being will rejoice
when your lips speak what is right." (vs. 15-16)

And one other thing we will do is we will learn to speak with wisdom, but that is next week's topic!