

Dr. Fred Putnam, Proverbs, Lecture 3

Welcome back to our third lecture on the book of Proverbs. I'm going to speak very briefly about a couple of verses from the forward that is the first nine chapters and then spend most of our time in this third lecture talking about the aspects of an individual Proverb, and how we look at it in order to understand it and to then eventually use it.

Last time we looked at verses two through six of the first chapter. I'd like to look briefly at verse seven and then at a couple of other verses later in the forward. Verse seven says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction." What does that mean exactly? What does it mean, "The fear of the LORD"? Does it mean to be afraid? Well, yeah, there are many places in the Bible where people are afraid. They meet the Lord, they fall down on their faces, they seem to faint or pass out. The people of Israel were terrified to hear the LORD speak from Mount Sinai. But, in interpreting poetry one of the things that we pay most attention to is the line that is next to, or that accompanies, the line we're trying to understand.

So, we could try to understand the fear of the Lord in two primary ways. One is to type it into our computers, or whatever program we have, and look up "Fear of the LORD" everywhere and then add all of those things up and come up with some sort of definition. But, in poetry the much more valid way is to look at the line next to it, which in this case is, "Fools despise wisdom and instruction." Now, this verse is an example of what we call "antithetical parallelism", where the two lines say opposite things, or they contrast.

And, so, the question then is what is the contrast with "the fear of the LORD"? Well, we have the word "fools", okay, so it seems that if "the fear of the LORD" is "the beginning of knowledge," well, we know that fools, in Proverbs, don't have knowledge or wisdom or understanding, so, fools must be people who don't fear the LORD. What do they do instead? That's where it becomes more

interesting because instead of saying fools fear other people or fools dishonor the LORD, or something like that, it says, "Fools despise wisdom and instruction." The point of that is that wisdom and instruction have their source in the LORD.

Now, it's very common to speak of the book of Proverbs as secular wisdom as I mentioned earlier. If we were to turn to chapter two, I invite you to look at the first six verses there. Again I'm not going to read them all, because of time; I'm just going to read the first and the sixth. "My son if you receive my sayings and treasure my commandments within you...." and then you will do these other things, then verse 5, "You will discern the fear of the LORD and discover the knowledge of GOD for the LORD gives wisdom, from his mouth are knowledge and understanding."

So fools, if they despise wisdom and instruction, are actually despising this--this is what we call a metonymy, one thing is being named instead of the other. The LORD is the source of wisdom and instruction. Do fools despise the Lord? Well, yes. Whether they despise him directly and knowingly is not really the point. The point is, that they despise the wisdom and instruction that only come from him. And, by the way, those verses in chapter two, verses one through six, show us that Solomon himself recognized that any wisdom that is displayed in the book of Proverbs does not come from him; it's Divine Wisdom. This book is actually divine revelation. It comes from God, because to seek out wisdom, to search for her and find her, when you find her, what you find is the fear of the LORD, who is, after all, the source of all wisdom.

So, it's as though Solomon is making sure upfront that we understand that this book doesn't rest on his authority alone but it also rests on the authority of God. So here, when we look at fools despising wisdom and instruction, that is, despising the wisdom and instruction that come from God, that's contrasted with the fear of the Lord. So then instead of asking ourselves what's the opposite of fearing, we could ask ourselves, if we want to understand the fear of the Lord what's the contrast?--with despising the LORD. So fear, you see, is put in contrast

with despising, to look down on, to discount, to think of no regard, or to belittle, even. Then, how is that the beginning of knowledge? Well, the opposite of looking down on someone is to respect or honor or at least pay attention to or heed, maybe as strong as to obey them. And even with obedience, of course, you can even despise someone and obey them. So, we're not talking about that kind of obedience, begrudging obedience, but cheerful, willing acquiescence. That is, Solomon says, the attitude that we're to have toward the LORD if we want to grow in wisdom. That's the beginning, that's how wisdom begins.

You know, there was a great teacher, Allan MacRae, who used to say, "Christians always talk about wanting to know God's will for their lives." He said "That's not the first step. The first step is to determine to *do* God's will, and then ask what God's will might be." That's in essence what Solomon is saying. He's saying, you first have to say, "Am I willing to fear the Lord, that is, to honor what he says in this book?" Remember, this is part of the first nine chapters. This is part of the book of Proverbs which at one time was not part of a big Bible it was just a scroll by itself that travelled around and people would read as an independent document, without Psalms in front of it and Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs and Isaiah after it. So, he's not talking about, generic obedience- although again, because the book of Proverbs is in the Bible, we can understand it that way today.

When he wrote it he was talking about how were people, how are you, going to respond to what is written in this book, in what have come to be these- thirty-one chapters.

A great illustration of what he means by that is actually two very famous verses, probably two of the four most famous verses in the book of Proverbs. The first, chapter three verses five and six:

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and don't lean on your own understanding. In all your ways know him and he will make your paths straight."

That actually comes in the middle of a poem. The poem goes from verse one to verse twelve. If you read through those you'll find that all the odd numbered verses in those first twelve verses tell you either to do something or not to do something, and sometimes they say both. So, verse one, "Don't forget my teachings but let your heart keep my commandments," that's negative and positive. Verse five, "Trust," that's positive. "Do not lean," that's negative. "In all your ways know him," that's positive. And, then in the even numbered verses, verses one through twelve, there's a result, in each case or an outcome. Again, these aren't laws and promises--we're not saying that--but these are counselors. If you do this, this is the way things generally tend to work out. This is the way; this is the advice upon which you should base your life.

I should back up a second, verse 12 doesn't end that way, but that's the end of the poem. Very commonly in Hebrew poetry a pattern that's established, is the end of a section or of the whole poem is signaled by breaking the pattern. That's pretty standard. Actually, it's a lot like an English sonnet, where you have sets of three sets of four lines and then in the Shakespearean format the last two lines have a separate rhyme pattern, not that there's any relationship there.

But in verses 5 and 6, what is he really saying? What does it mean to trust in the LORD with all your heart? We say, "I trust the LORD with all my heart," but remember he's writing in the context of a book of wisdom, a book of Proverbs or we might better call it a book of instruction, like the other books are called across the ancient Near East. Don't lean on your own understanding.

You're about to embark on a study of the book of Proverbs. You're an Israelite, probably in your late teens, part of this class of young men who are on their way to take paths of leadership so this is your curriculum, for maybe even a whole year. You're going to read things in Proverbs that you don't agree with. Because you're going to think that you know better. So you're going to say; "Well, yes, I know he says that if you're a companion of prostitutes you're going to squander your father's wealth, but I can control myself. I won't squander my

father's wealth. I'll just use a little bit of it for that." And so you say to yourself, "Oh I can, I can make my own decisions." Isn't that what he means by not trusting, not leaning, on your own understanding?

You see here it's a question of attitude. Are you going to trust the Lord who gives you the book, to actually know what he's talking about, first, and to have your good in mind (not only your good but your best). So that when he says in the Proverbs, one of these advisors comes along, one of these counselors that are in writing, and says: "The mind of man plans his way but the Lord directs his steps." Are you going to say, "I think I'm captain of my own fate. I have a soul to keep and I'm going to do it"? Or, are you going to say, "You know, maybe I need to think more about the choices that I make and recognize that I don't act autonomously. That I'm under the direction and control of the Lord."

Is the verse then saying, you need to be humble in your ways, you need to recognize that if you have success it's not your success ultimately but the Lord's. You need to recognize that if trouble comes your way they're not troubles that are random. But they're from God, himself for your good. So what we read in the book actually becomes, the Book of Proverbs becomes, a standard for us. And that's why he says: "He will make your paths straight." One of the funny things here is that it would actually be, "and it will make your paths straight." But, you know, the Hebrews were being a little bit more ambiguous than English. That is the trust or your heart or something like that if you're actually trusting. But making your paths straight, your paths will be in line with the way that they should be. They will be in order. You'll be on this path, not on the right, not on the left. So the attitude that he's talking about, when we come to study it, the attitude has to be one, "That I'm determined to do, I am determined to obey as best as I can understand. That in this case, at least, obedience leads to understanding." Our ability to work with and use Proverbs grows according to our disposition to embody them and to show by our behavior that we are in fact, to go back to verse seven of chapter one, fearing the Lord because that's where wisdom starts.

This attitude, I think is, at least partially a way of protecting us against thinking, either on the one hand, that I can out-smart God, or Solomon even, but its also the necessary pre-condition to any kind of learning. I've been a teacher for almost a quarter of a century, and I can tell you that students, who don't want to learn, won't learn. Because ultimately I can't teach anyone anything. All I can do is talk or try to get students to talk and hope that the things that are important will become important enough to them, that they will want to learn them, and that they will go seek them out. Writing down notes and memorizing them and spitting them back on a test or on an exam or in a paper, that's not learning. It's accumulation of facts, perhaps, or opinion, but learning is making something part of ourselves, part of who we are. Becoming the person that we, that the teacher in this case, wants us to be. So most of the time, my goals in teaching, for example, have not been the students will know x, y, z, although there's always some of that because Academic Deans like to see lists like that, but it's really that students will recognize that this is the case or that they will see or understand, or really that they'll desire. Because that's where learning comes from and that's really what Solomon's saying here.

So we can't just treat the Proverbs as things to be analyzed and dissected and studied, even though we're going to talk about that, but rather as things to be obeyed. Rather as counselors to be listened to, to be taken account of. As people who are standing by our side at our shoulder sitting around the table with us giving us good sound advice, that it is then our responsibility to weigh, evaluate and do our best to follow. That's why I think, unlike in Proverbs in the wider culture where we can have Proverbs that do contradict each other or sound like they contradict each other, we don't really get that from a proverb in the book, because the counselors are all speaking with one voice, not with many.

Now let me turn to a different topic. When we look at individual Proverbs what do we look for? Again, I'm not talking about the proverbs or the verses in chapters one through nine, although there are some collections of Proverbs in

there: for example Proverbs chapter six verse twenty-seven through thirty-five, we have a number of things that sound just like they came from chapters ten through twenty-nine. And there are quite a number of those. So the things that I'm saying about chapters ten and following apply to those verses as well. But most of those chapters one through nine are these larger poems, that we can read as poems just as we would read a psalm.

Biblical proverbs, as you recognize when you come to chapter ten, tend to use two lines or some of them three lines. And then our English Bibles, which more and more tend to be printed in two columns, they're presented in two lines (even if they really only consist of a single sentence). There are some types of Proverbs as a whole that really don't have any of this, what we call parallelism, in them. So Proverbs that consist of a command "Do this because" or "Do this so that ..." that's really a single sentence. There's no parallelism there. There's a cause and an effect there perhaps, we could say, or there's a result and a cause. Sometimes they're put in the opposite order. But they're really not parallel, so we have to be careful not to be misled by the layout of our English Bibles into thinking that we have to find some kind of parallelism in every verse. As I said earlier, though, since lines are parallel, and since Proverbs were apparently created this way, although there's some debate about this. Some people say that the proverbs were originally a single statement like in English. The old "look before you leap" thing and then somebody added a second line that says, "those who don't look fall to their death" or something like that. That sounds more like a biblical proverb, not really an English one. Some people say that's how all biblical proverbs started then a second proverbial line got attached to it then the two were put together. But that's just a theory, there's no evidence for that.

But what we do want to ask ourselves is: "Are the two lines actually parallel?" So, here's a very obvious example. Proverbs 10:1 "A wise son makes a father glad, a foolish son is his mother's grief." You have a wise son on one line and a foolish son on the other, a father, a mother, gladness and grief. That all

sounds pretty parallel to me.

And then we ask ourselves, “Okay what about the next line? Does that have another thing about wise and foolish son, or father and mother and gladness and grief?” The next line says (remember the verses- you don’t know if they’re original) the next line is, “Treasures of wickedness do not profit.” That’s quite a bit different. So, let’s just assume from that without going into a lot of detail that we’re onto a new thing there, so we can just talk about verse ten, these two lines in verse ten. So we ask ourselves “what are the pieces of the two lines that correspond to each other?” As I said the two sons and the parents and the outcome of the sons’ behavior. And so we look at this and since those are contrasting terms notice the son’s part is not contrasting, but the wise and foolish is, the gladness and grief is, and the father and mother, they’re not contrasting, but they’re different. Furthermore, it actually says, depending on your translation, it may say “a father,” and “his mother” which is actually the way it reads. And so we might ask ourselves “Why? Is there some truth to that? Is a mother more likely to be grieved by her son’s folly?” Is there a reason for the proverb saying it the way it does? Let’s say right up front, there’s always a reason things are said the way they are. Whether we could figure out the reason may not be quite as easy, but there’s always a reason. Is it possible that mothers are more likely to be grieved by their son’s waywardness, let’s say, and how do fathers respond? Do they grieve? Maybe fathers tend to become more angry. There’s a tendency for dads to become more mad when their sons act foolishly and mothers to become sad. And are we reading too much into it? Maybe we are, I don’t know. Are fathers happy when their sons turn out to be wise and mothers aren’t happy? Or are fathers happy in a way that’s different than mothers are? You know I’ve often wondered if fathers are happy about their children’s wise behavior in ways that we could describe as proud, not in a negative way, but just, you know, they’re proud, and mothers, at least a lot of my observation is they tend to be satisfied with the way that their children are and it’s more of a quiet contentment, not quite the same.

Again, am I reading too much into it? Maybe I am, I don't know. But I do think that there's a lot more compressed in here than we often give them credit for. That maybe even very obvious verses like this are given to us so that we can spend time thinking about them, pondering them, trying to figure out, not only what does it say, but why does it say it *the way* that it says it? And since proverbs are poetic, biblical proverbs at least are poetic, one of the characteristics of reading poetry is that we slow down, and we read it more carefully and we pay a lot more attention to words than we do when we're reading just a paragraph, even if it's a paragraph we're reading in the newspaper or a novel or a book of history, theology, philosophy or anything else. That is we pay attention to the individual words. Every choice of word becomes significant because, the poet, and in wisdom material even greater, because of the enormous compression that goes on in a proverb. In fact, think of this: a proverb is not just a bit of compressed wisdom. What a proverb really is, is a compressed story. It's a whole story smashed into six or seven or eight words in Hebrew okay- eighteen or nineteen or twenty words in English. But it's a whole story, it's pushed in.

Now I've actually written some short stories, what I call very short stories. And my daughter told me there's a name for them on the Internet called sniglets or something like that. A sniglet is a piece of something that you've written that's less than fifty words. I've deliberately written stories that are fifty words or less, where the whole story is there. That's really hard; I've only written a couple of them because it's so hard to do. A proverb takes a story and compresses it into a fraction of that length. And so what we're doing in reading the proverb, we want to pay attention to how it's written because that helps us see what's been compressed and helps us then unfold it. Or like one of those sponges that you get at Christmas, you know, that's smashed flat and you add water and it puffs up. That's kind of what a proverb's like; only a proverb puffs up *a lot* bigger than any sponge ever will.

Because one of the things that's so exciting about Proverbs is that you know I talked in the last lecture although I didn't use this word, but what is the authority of a proverb? Is a proverb a promise? No. What is it? Is it just kind of hopeful advice, if you do this maybe it'll work out? It's a counselor, an advisor. One of the things that makes a proverb so powerful that is not true of other short ways of saying things, like mottos or aphorisms or slogans even something like that is that, and I should say the dividing lines between those are kind of fuzzy, and people argue about that all the time, but is that a proverb, you can take the same proverb and apply it to lots and lots of different situations. And in a sense, it's almost as though the greater the range of situations to which a proverb can be applied, the greater its authority. So the more, I'm going to use, I'm nervous about using this word, the more "true" the proverb becomes. Because the more global it is in its application, the more universally we can use it, the more useful it becomes and the more likely we are to use it. It gains authority from its usefulness.

Now all proverbs can be extended way beyond their original reference. So this one talks about fathers and mothers and sons. Is it only talking about family relationships? No, not at all. It's certainly talking about those; I mean we can think back immediately to the Ten Commandments, right, "honor your father and mother that it may go well with you and you may extend your days upon the earth," or "in the land." But the range of its application is to any relationship where one person is responsible for the well being of another. So that, we can talk about camp counselors and their counselee's. You know the foolish camper who's always sneaking off at night to go swimming in, you know, in moonlight or canoeing down the river in the dark, or doing whatever else it might be, or lighting fires in the woods with magnifying glasses. I hope I'm not giving any of you ideas, do not try this at home. That camper is going to cause all sorts of grief to the counselor, and to the whole camp probably. Whereas the camper who's intent is to please the counselor, to learn from him or her, to do what's right, to be wise,

in a word, is going to make them happy. We could say that's a power play. It doesn't have to be a power play at all. It could just be that, you know, one of my great delights in being a teacher is when a student gets it. I never saw myself as somebody who was out to get students, or to prove that I knew more than they did, or to kind of thing or to put them down. But instead I wanted every student that I had to go beyond me. I've learned this much, they should be able to go this far, that's the goal. Well that's what a parent's goal is too. That's a counselor's goal, that's what anybody who's in authority, and especially a position of responsibility is. Not just the president of a corporation, for example, but a guidance counselor, a teacher, there are lots of examples, and ranges, a mentor and disciple, but all those relationships they want to see the person under them succeed. They want to see them grow; they want to see them mature and become wise as Solomon says here.

So this proverb applies to any relationship like that. When we start thinking about the different kinds of relationships there are, maybe we begin even to say, and in fact some responses, are going to be different depending on not just the behavior of the son, but on the nature of the person who has responsibility. Just like fathers may respond differently to their children's success than mothers do, or their children's failure. Some counselees or counselors or mentors or pastors will respond differently. So even if we were to go through this verse and say "what's the opposite of making your father glad?" A foolish son makes his mother sad. I don't see any difference between that and grief. Are grief and gladness exactly opposite each other? Well, we'd have to play with that a bit. Not by looking it up in the English dictionary, but by going through the book of Proverbs and seeing how Proverbs uses the idea of gladness and grief. What else are they contrasted with? What else are they compared with? How are these words used in the book? Because remember, this book was kind of it's own little world for a while. Existing within an ancient Near East where this kind of instruction would have been understood. Everybody would have known this is Solomon's instruction for his sons, for his students, for those who follow him, for his disciples.

So we read the verse and say, “Okay, we have two lines, they are contrasting to each other,” and paying attention to the nature of the contrast in the terms helps us understand what the proverb itself is saying. In fact, most of the proverbs in chapters ten through fifteen, as I mentioned, many of them are that kind of proverb. What we call antithetical or contrasting. So the point is: what is the nub of the contrast? Is it the behavior? Is it the outcome? Is it the relationship between behavior and outcome? And we also notice here, that it’s not simply the story that we could imagine. That is, we could even imagine a set of parents with two children, one of whom turns out to be wise, and the other who turns out to be foolish. We could write a novel about that. In fact, novels have been written about that. And in a sense, the effect of the child’s behavior on the parent is really the point of the proverb. The effect of the learner on the teacher, the effect of the disciple on the mentor, that’s really what Solomon is getting at. What’s most striking is he assumes that the effect that our decisions and actions will have on those who are responsible for us, who watch out for our wellbeing, he assumes that that effect will motivate us to choose wisdom rather than foolishness.

So, you see, the proverb, like, the whole book, assumes a relational world, a relational life where we’re not existing as isolated individuals. But in fact, we’re connected to each other in a way that twanging one string of the cobweb makes the whole cobweb vibrate. The parts farthest off vibrate the least and those that are the closest vibrate the most, some of them may even break. So that Solomon’s world, and the world that he envisions, and this is not because it is a tenth century B.C. world, it’s not because he is writing three thousand years ago, not because he’s writing to this kinder, gentler, simpler society, but instead, because this is the way that things are meant to be. Relationships ought to guide us in our decision-making. The consequences, the outcome of our behavior ought to make us either pause or make us go ahead. The consideration of the outcome of that behavior should always make us pause. So we say, “How will this affect those people or that person?” And, we look at that verse and say, “Yes, there are some verses

where we have the contrast.” And by asking ourselves, “What’s the nub of contrast? The rubbing point? The sticking point?” We can begin to extrapolate out from these few words, even in English this is a short proverb. What is the proverb, what is Solomon, getting at?

This proverb actually has an image in it that might be invisible in your translation. It’s very interesting that the second line says, “A foolish son is his mother’s grief.” The first line is pretty literal: wise son makes his father happy, causes a father to rejoice. But a son himself is not grief. See that? It’s kind of a funny thing. Almost every proverb has an image like that where one thing is used and we can say, “Well, I know what he means,” but he’s not using the words in *exactly* their literal sense; he’s playing with a metaphor. I talked about that a fair bit in one of the lectures on the book of Psalms. If you want to look at that, I think it was the second or third one. That might be helpful. I’m not going to go into all that detail here. In this case, a son is not grief. A son is not even the source of grief. It’s the decisions that the son makes, and the effect of those decisions on the son’s life and wellbeing that are the source of grief. You see that?

So that’s what Solomon has done. So that’s compression of a proverb. Solomon has taken all of those ideas and put them into so few words that we could spend the next two hours (which we don’t have) talking about this verse and what it means. Then we’ve only done the first proverb and we haven’t really unpacked it all. You know, I’m giving you the fruits of hours of thinking about it. If we went back and reconstructed all the thoughts, we would be here for much of the rest of the day. It’s thinking through what’s being said and why’s it being said this way?

There are a bunch of these proverbs, quite a number of them, especially later on, that I mentioned earlier called emblematic proverbs, and even proverbs that what are called synonymous, where the two lines say more or less the same thing. There are a lot of those in chapters one through nine because in the extended poems you tend to get more synonymous poetry. Most of the book of psalms is synonymous. But here in proverbs, we turn over to 11:10 and find, “when it goes

well with the righteous, the city rejoices, when the wicked perish, there is glad shouting.” You say, “Wait a second. That’s not synonymous. We have righteous and wicked.” Yes, but you notice what he did. It’s a very clever thing. In saying something, since we can say things negatively or positively, it’s a really cool feature of language. We can say things in a lot of different ways. In this case, if it goes well with the righteous, but the wicked perish, you see those are saying the same thing? It’s like saying, he who is wise is this, and he who is not a fool, is this. Well, to not be a fool is to be wise. By negating it, even though we’re using a synonymous term, by using the negative, or in this case, the negative consequence, we actually say the same thing; we make a synonymous statement.

So here we have two lines that seem to say basically the same thing. When everything goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices, when the wicked perish, there is glad shouting. Like a lot of proverbs, this one sounds sort of tautological. That is, self-evident. Like saying “two is two,” or “a hat is a hat.” And you might be tempted to think to yourself, “Did Solomon really have to be the wisest man in the world to dream up stuff like this?” Remember he didn’t dream it all up. He’s adapting things and borrowing and putting them together, approving them. But really, when we have a verse, whether it’s antithetic, or synonymous, or emblematic, it doesn’t really matter, that sounds like it’s simply an observation, we need to remember this: proverbs are counselors. They are giving us advice, even if it just sounds like an observation. So, even in English to say, go back to our example, “a stitch in time saves nine.” There’s no advice there, it’s just an observation. This is the way it is. If you take the stitch in time, you’ll save nine stitches later on. But there’s still implicit advice there.

Even here in Proverbs 11:10, “When it goes well with the righteous the city rejoices; when the wicked perish there’s glad shouting.” There’s implicit advice there, isn’t there? What kind of a city would you rather live in? What kind of a land would you rather live in? One that is full of mourning and sadness, or one that is full of rejoicing and gladness? And if we think about this, what if we said it

this way: when it goes well with the innocent, but when the guilty perish. So now, suddenly, maybe we're talking not about some abstract moral category, but now we're talking about a system of justice; we're talking to future judges, and Solomon is saying, "Remember, you can tell a lot about the system of justice in a place by the general life of that place. Look at the city. Are people happy, truly happy? Then probably, there's a much greater chance than that the justice system is working, that bribes are not being taken, that judges are not twisting their decisions, but that the guilty are being convicted and the innocent are being acquitted." So, the verse then becomes a warning to judges and, really, to every citizen that to look around and make sure that you are establishing the kind of city that you would even want to live in. The two lines say the same thing, and they say something that sounds kind of obvious to us. And yet, they contain implicit counsel or implicit advice.

I'm not going to look at any of the emblematic parallelisms because I think that they're much more obvious, but I will point out something about them. And that is that there are a number of emblematic parallelisms that use images from nature, and here's a case where we can kind of get ourselves into trouble, unless we actually live or have lived in the Middle East. For example, "Clouds and winds without rain is a man who boasts of a gift of falsehood," a lying gift, a false gift—that's Proverbs 25:14. We think, oh, we have clouds and wind all the time without rain: that's nothing special." Ah, but you see, in the land where Solomon is living, almost always when there are clouds, there's rain. It's very, very rare not to. If you have a combination of clouds and wind, there will be rain. So to have clouds and wind without rain is almost like a curse. Especially because it tends to only be cloudy at certain times of the year, and that's the time of year when it's supposed to rain. If it doesn't rain, your crops will fail. If your crops fail, you die because there's no supermarket down the street. So, we need to know a bit about meteorology, climate, all sorts of things, and we say, well, "I don't have time to," or "I don't have a research library." Well, you know the truth is even a good, one-

volume Bible dictionary will give you a lot of the kind of information that you need. Talk about animals, cattle, climate and all sorts of things that can really help you understand the book of Proverbs. In fact, in many ways, I think a good couple of reference tools are often as helpful if not more helpful than a commentary because they'll serve you for reading lots of things, not just the book of Proverbs but almost any part of Scripture. Especially in Proverbs though, where so much of it is cultural, we need to be careful to read things culturally.

I once got a paper from a student. It was an assignment in class, and he wrote on this verse: Proverbs 20:14. "Bad, bad says the buyer, but when he goes his way, then he boasts." And his paper was—I will kindly describe it as a five page rant about merchants who would order things and not pay for them from the suppliers. And I invited him to come to my office, and I said, "Tell me what's going on." And it turned out that he was a pipe-fitter who had his own business in his basement, and many times he had fitted pipes, I don't know what that means, I just know that he fitted them, in response to an order and not been paid. He was so frustrated, and he said, "Here's finally a Bible verse that I can use." And I said, "Well, have you ever been to a Middle Eastern market?" And he said, "No." I said, "Have you ever heard of haggling?" He said, "No." I said, "Well, you know, when you're in a Middle Eastern market, you never pay the price. The person tells you what it costs, and they assume that you're going to argue for sometimes for maybe, at normal price, an hour or so to get them until you find the agreeable price. That's actually part of the bargain! It's not like a U.S. supermarket where you walk in, and the price is stamped onto it and you have no choice. I guess if it's a bruised tomato you could hold it up and say, "Will you give me five cents off?" But you have no choice. And even then they'll probably say, "No, pick another one," and they'll take the bruised one away then, put it back later. Well, here, the point is, if you don't know that this is a haggling culture, you misread the verse, and think that this guy is lying. Well, yes, he is lying in a sense. I mean, if he's going to boast about it, he's not saying it's really bad. But it's not lying if

everybody agrees that that's part of the rules of the game. In football, is it a lie if a team lines up and then changes their formation just before the snap? Is an onside kick or a fake punt, is that a lie? Well, of course it's a lie, but it's within the rules of the game, and the same way this verse. But if you don't know that there's a game going on, you might think, "Wait a second; that team just cheated. That's not right; you can't do that." Well, yes you can.

But a big part of reading Proverbs and benefitting from them is getting back into that world and beginning to sort of immersing ourselves in it. I really like Bible Archeology Review and Bible Review magazines for that purpose. A lot of their articles can be kind of irritating, but reading things about archeology and reading about documents that have been discovered and reading marriage contracts, for example, or almost anything helps us begin to understand the kind of world of the Proverbs and not just Proverbs, but the whole Old Testament. And so the authors never explain anything because they assume the reader knows all about it. They don't have to explain it. We have to somehow try to figure out what's going on. We can't reinvent ourselves, but we need to try to step back and at least get a little closer to that world. And especially in Proverbs, where we have stories from a different culture, which means a very different way of looking at a lot of things, smashed into a few words. We're trying to unpack them. We're most prone to unpack them with water. Remember the sponge? We're going to pour water from our sink. We're not going to go to the country where the sponge was manufactured to get their water to put on the sponge and make it bigger. Well, same thing happens with the story. And if we live in upper middle class, suburban America, or on the East Coast, or in wherever it might be, although I hope these lectures go around the world, but wherever we live, we're going to import our experience and our form of the story into their world. There's some legitimacy to that because, after all, Proverbs can apply to situations in any kind of life; I mean, that's the whole point of a proverb. But learning to see the world that they saw is a big part of learning to read the Proverbs.

So we want to look at the parallelism. Pay attention to that. Really, what we're doing is forcing ourselves to do is to pay attention. That's really what we're doing, pay attention. I don't care, and no good teacher will care, when you get the right label on it. The label's not the point. The point is, "Can I explain how these lines are related and what it's saying and why it's saying it the way it is?" And then, what is the story that underlies this? We'll come back to that in our fourth lecture and we'll talk a bit about images and then look specifically at one or two proverbs.

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