

Preaching Proverbs

Several years ago, I attended a workshop at a church conference. The workshop speaker said that the book of Proverbs contained many statements that were “generally true,” kind of like, “a rule of thumb”.

There are some clear reasons that such an approach cannot be maintained.

#1) The Criteria: After the session was over, I approached the speaker and asked if he could help me figure out which proverbs were, and which ones were not, “generally true”. I asked, “Was it generally true that if we trusted the Lord with all our heart and leaned not to our own understanding, but in all our ways acknowledged Him, that He would “generally” direct our paths?”

Stated another way, “Which proverb should we take as “absolutely true,” as a promise, and which ones are the “generally true” principles? If one takes this position on the book of Proverbs, then certainly there must be a criteria for distinguishing the “promises” from the “generally true rules of thumb.”

This test alone should seemingly put an end to such an approach towards Proverbs. There is no way to discern what is “always true,” from what is “generally true.” I could suggest a criteria, but it would not hold up upon further scrutiny.

#2) Other Such Promises: Many of the so called “generally true” promises in Proverbs have clearly corresponding “promises” found throughout the Scriptures. What is the difference between. . .

- Proverbs 11:28 - “He that trusteth in his riches shall fall: but the righteous shall flourish as a branch” [Is it a “promise” or generally true? Have all such individuals fallen? Do the righteous always flourish as a branch (see Psalm 1)? Well, it is absolutely true in an ultimate sense, if that is the intended point of Solomon.]

- Proverbs 22:16 - “He that oppreseth the poor to increase his riches, and he that giveth to the rich, shall surely come to want.” [Is it

always true or generally true? Have all such individuals come to want?”]

AND -- the point that Jesus is making in the Gospels . . .

- Luke 16:19ff - “There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day. . . .”

- Luke 12:16ff “And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods . . .”

The words of Proverbs 11:28 and 22:16 could easily be cited and applied to any message on these two N.T. passages.

#3) Other Equally Proverbial Statements: The Bible contains other truths or promises that we may not call “proverbs,” but are just as proverbial in content, format, and application. For instance . . .

- “He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”

- “Give, and it shall be given to you, pressed down, overflowing”

- “Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.”

These verses, and many others, are as “proverbial” in content, format, and application as those found in the book of Proverbs.

#4) Inconsistency: How we handle the book of Proverbs is surprising unlike how we handle most all other scriptural promises, truths, or principles. We cite and allude to many other biblical truths and promises without saying that they are “generally true.”

#5) Eisegesis: Perhaps even more disturbing is that I have observed that a common reason for determining which proverbs may be absolutely true, and which ones may be “generally true,” is experience. Typically, it is said, “I can point to examples where that was or was not true in the lives

of godly or wicked people" or "I know a godly family, a Christian, a strong marriage, etc., of which it was not true."

#6) Proverbs Are Called "true": Proverbs 26:10-11 states that fools and transgressors return to their wrong-doing. This proverb would be one of those that some would say is "generally true." However, the Apostle Peter cites this proverb, and adds to it (II Peter 2:22) -- "The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire." Well, do all fools and transgressors return back to their folly?

However Peter not only cites Proverbs, and adds to it, but states, "according to the true proverb." Peter is not say that the proverbs is being cited accurately, but that it is a true proverb.

#7) Word Meaning: Two Greek words were used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word "proverb" ("mar-shal"). In translating the Hebrew, the Greeks of the Lord's day used both "par-oimia" (see Proverbs 1:1; 25:1; 26:7) and "para-bole" (Proverbs 1:6). The Greeks used both words interchangeably as seen in the first six verses of the book of Proverbs.

In fact, the Apostle John used the Greek word (par-oimia) when speaking of what was clearly a parable -- (see John 10:6, 16:25, 29). Interestingly, this the same word Peter also uses in II Peter 2:22, as stated, is which was linked to Proverbs 1:1.

The use of the word "proverb" to refer to a parable is not because "parables" are "generally true." It is because parables and proverbs are the same in their essence and purpose. They both refer to a word picture designed to capture a truth. In fact, there have been many artists who have sought to picture the proverbs through pen and ink. Parables and proverbs are different ways of communicating a truth.

How should we handle the book of Proverbs?

Some insight into how to handle the book of Proverbs can come from the typical response to the following example. If I were to say, during

a conversation about counseling others,

If anyone is looking for wisdom, he or she needs to ask God, and He will give them the wisdom needed! The Scriptures clearly state, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (James 1:5.)

How would you respond? Is that promise absolutely true, or generally true? Now we both know that there are biblical examples where God denies wisdom to His people (I Samuel 28:6 - "And when Saul enquired of the LORD, the LORD answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets.").

Your initial response to this example may well be instructive. How Bible teachers and preachers approach the book of Proverbs is odd because other biblical promises, or principles, found throughout the Bible are not handled in the same inconsistent or confusing way as with Proverbs.

Your initial response as to how I handle James 1:5 might be something like . . .

We all know that there are other "principles," other "truths" about prayer that govern James 1:5. James 1:5 is absolutely true. It is a promise, but it is governed by other equally sure and certain truths of Scripture. In fact, the very passage cited includes another limiting principle called "faith" - "ask in faith, nothing wavering". There are a number of other principles that come into play when it comes to God answering our prayers.

I would totally agree. There are other "principles," or other "truths" that intersect and interact with that promise, and also with most all principles, promises. That is exactly the point! Promises do not operate alone.

Likewise, the book of Proverbs is filled with truths, principles, promises, or laws that operate in God's world, but they do not operate alone. So then, why not handle the book of Proverbs the way we handle the whole of Scripture and the other promises.

Are the many proverbs within the book of Proverbs also promises? — “yes”. Indeed, the proverbs are promises, sure & certain principles, that operate in God’s world. However, they interact with other equally sure and certain promises, truths, or principles. Virtually all of the promises or principles in the Scriptures do NOT exist in a vacuum, but exist along side of other promises or principles.

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The many “proverbs” found in the book of Proverbs are promised principles. The word “promises” speaks to the certainty of the truth. Principles speak to the nature of the truth. Indeed, the proverbs are promises, sure & certain principles, that operate in God’s world. However, as to their nature, there are laws or spiritual principles that interact with other equally sure and certain principles. Virtually all of the promises or principles throughout the Scriptures do NOT exist in a vacuum, but exist along side of other promises or principles.¹ Allow me illustrate this in the natural, and then from the book of Proverbs.

The law of gravity is a law, a truth, and principle of physics. It is part of our thinking anytime we begin climbing or moving upward. We are reminded that, “What goes up must come down.” It is not “generally true”. It is a law, a truth, a principle of physics upon which we operate in life. It is also a law which is relied upon in the most demanding scientific endeavors and stated in the form of an equation [$F_g = (G) \text{ times } (m_1 m_2) \text{ over } (r^2)$].

If you have flown in an airplane recently, you may have been reminded of the law of gravity, especially as the airplane experienced turbulence. We well understand that the law of gravity is still operating as we fly. However, an airplane is also being affected by other laws that are operating along with of the law of gravity. The laws of aerodynamics are also operating, which allow the plane to take off and cruise in spite of the law of gravity.

How does this airplane ever get off the ground? In and of itself, it weighs thousands of pounds, and add to that, the fuel, the luggage, and hundreds of passengers. The gravitational pull on that airplane, or weight, is tremendous. Nevertheless, the pilot has learned to take off, fly, and land that airplane so effectively that it is one of the safest ways to travel.

Simply, the pilot, as he taxis to the beginning of the runway, glances at the bright colored “anti-gravity toggle switch,” located on the front array of lights and buttons, which will be flipped to the on position shortly. Upon take-off, as that pilot pushes both throttles to full power, and increasingly approaches 150-180 mph, and then pulls back on the yoke/“wheel.” It is at this point that the pilot flips that anti-gravity toggle switch, which turns off the gravitation field around his airplane. Along with other learned flying skills, which likewise increasingly “turn off” the law of gravity, the airplane then lifts into the air.

Now, of course, you and I know that this is not true. The pilot has no misunderstanding as to the reality that the law of gravity is still operating and knows that there is no brightly colored toggle switch which can turn off the law of gravity. However, the pilot does know that there are laws of aerodynamics, and has learned how to take advantage of those other laws.

The pilot understands that there are other laws, principles of physics, truths, “promises,” that will also be operating, and playing upon his airplane. The laws of motion, lift, drag, and thrust are also playing a role as he lifts that plane off the ground. In fact, how sharply he pulls that airplane's nose up into the air will affect whether the law of gravitation will again over-rule Bernoulli's law of lift.

There are laws of aerodynamics that operate along with the law of gravity. He must fly that airplane with an understanding of all the laws which are exerting their power on that airplane at take-off and throughout the flight. At times he will even use some of the other laws, that would seemingly impede the flying of that airplane, to maneuver, control, or land the airplane.

Learning to fly is not learning how to invalidate the law of gravity, but how to use yet other laws, along with gravity, to reach amazing cruising

altitudes of 30,00 and 45,000 feet. In fact, working along with the law of gravity, the pilot returns to earth.

To say that the law of gravity is “generally true,” because we can overcome the effects of that law, or because there are other laws that are also operating which attenuate the effects of gravity during flight, would not only be a misleading way to characterize it, but factually erroneous. The fact is, many laws are operating as we fly, even well beyond the law of gravity, or even the laws of drag and thrust.

Similarly, we would not say that the laws of gravity ,or acceleration, are "generally true," because you have a parachute. The typical effects of gravity and acceleration may be lessened by a parachute.

Nevertheless the law of gravity and the law of acceleration are fully operating. A parachute is just one way to deal with the laws of gravity and acceleration (A rocket strapped to ones back is another way -- at least for a while anyway). A parachute uses the others laws of resistance or drag to land safely, while the laws of gravity and acceleration continue to be in full effect.

Likewise, no one principle found in Proverbs is operating in this world, in its purest unaffected state.¹ There are multiple laws operating alongside of each other. In Proverbs, there are principles or laws about the wise, fools, rich, poor, transgressor, lazy, diligent, perverse, scoffers, righteous, naive-simple, friends, enemies, proud, humble, early, at the end, children, young, gray-haired, immoral/prostitute/drunard/glutton (lovers of pleasure), covetous, jealous, liars, talebearers, individuals, and groups of peoples. Compute the combinations and permutations of these many options.

For instance, Proverbs says that the road of the transgressors is hard. Is it hard for every transgressor? Is that a “promise,” or is it “generally true”? It is absolutely true! It is just as true as, “Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap.”

Now let’s introduce riches, which is another principle that affects how life operates.

- There are “rich + wrong-doers”.
- Put together wrong-doers + riches, or
- transgressors who have riches available to them,
- and those two together change the equation, change the outcome. . .

because Proverbs states that riches are a strong wall that protect the rich, that riches are their strong city - Proverbs 10:15 / 18:11.

Let with the law of acceleration, we have moved from the vacuum of the laboratory, to the real world, from the ideal to the real. Since, we don’t live in laboratory conditions, rich people are able to throw money at a lot of the consequences that come with being a wrong-doer. The poor + transgressor will end up on a lot more hard roads, for a longer period of time, and with a lot more bumps and bruises.

Proverbs says that laziness leads to poverty. However, there are . . .

- lazy people
- who have been left an inheritance.
- Therefore there are “lazy + rich people,”
- lazy people who are not in poverty (at least "yet")

Add other over-arching biblical principles/laws², that God has built into this world, which affect outcomes. The Bible states that, “To whom much is given, much is required.” Men bear different levels of responsibility. Add that law into the lives of men, and the outcome changes again.

There is another over-arching principle called “grace.” God’s grace to the saint, and even to the sinner, is also operating at all times. There is also “common grace.” — He allows the sun and rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Add in the effects of grace and the outcome changes again. Some do not fall so hard and fast because of God's gracious parachutes of life.

There is the law of “heritage” - that the Lord is kind to some because of the devotion and godliness of one’s “father.” Many of the kings of Israel were spared the full effects of their ungodliness because of King David.

There is the law of "now" and "at the end." Don't draw any conclusions to quickly about what you see or you think you see, there is an end to what people do in life. Some of God's promises extend a decades, life-times, and even centuries.

Instead of consigning promises / principles / biblical proverbs to the category of being “generally true,” why not recognize that they are laws and principles⁷ which are sure and certain (promises). Yet these laws or principles do not operate independent of other laws and principles. They all intersect and operate in God’s complex world, just as equally certain and sure.

In spite of those who would like to explain away the sure and certain promised principles found in Proverbs, the fact is that this world, and all that there is in it, is God’s world. I want to affirm that this world, though more complex than any one principle, operates by divine design and order, through natural and spiritual principles and laws. Those laws and principles are a mere reflection of Him, and one day will be fully reflected in His coming Kingdom.

The problem is not with the laws that operate in His world, but me, who was born with a desire to be lawless, and to live by my laws that I want to believe work, but in fact do not. The problem is with me who may operate by some of the promises and truths, but ignore, misunderstand, misapply, or dismiss other laws that are also operating.

1 - There are truths, promises, or principles that are founded on, grounded in who God is alone, Who He is . . .

- “I will never leave you, or forsake you.” or

- “For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of

love, which ye have shewed toward his name”.

There are no other principles or truths that will ever interact with Who He is and which will change the way that principle/law/promise works.

2 - There is the principle, the law, the truth, of

- “faith” - faith of a mustard seed

- of “gifts” - church at Corinth very gifted, but carnal

- of “God’s individual plans & sovereign purposes”-The Book of Ruth

- of “progressive revelation” (which was also operating in early Old Testament days and explains why allowances were given to Old Testament saints.)

- of “progressive sanctification” - put off and put on

