

ANCIENT WISDOM, EVERYDAY WORSHIP

Re-discovering Proverbs

15-Week Group Devotional
VOLUME 4: PROVERBS 15-19



THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Death and Destruction lie open before the LORD – how much more the hearts of men!
(PROVERBS 15: 11)

It's probably a good thing that we can't really judge the motives of another person. That way, we can at least offer them the benefit of the doubt when they act or speak irrationally or offensively.

Most of the time, however, we tend to presume we actually know their motives. Inevitably, this leads to all kinds of presuppositions which then furthers the cycle of suspicion and distrust. Not a very encouraging way to begin a devotional thought, is it? It's also a pretty lousy way to go through life.

Here's the heart of the matter – God sees the motives of those around us even when we don't. In fact (and this is a little sobering), God sees *our* motives even when we hide them or don't even fully recognize them ourselves.

At the end of the day, it's really none of our business what someone else's motives are. That's not between us and them; it's between them and God. What *is* our business, however, is what motivates us to do or say whatever it is we do or say. The sad reality is that we can't confidently trust our feelings, and Jeremiah reminds us that “the heart is deceitful above all things” (see Jeremiah 17: 9 – 10).

So, what do we do with all this? We surrender our heart to the One who created it. We commit our will to the One who designed it. We forfeit our motives to the only cause that matters ... the glory of God.

DISCUSS

Do you often question others' motives while defending your own?

Do you ever find yourself hiding your motives?

What motives do you bring to worship?

A TIMELY WORD

A man finds joy in giving an apt reply – and how good is a timely word! (PROVERBS 15:23)

In the language and culture of the Bible, the word translated “word” is an interesting one. For instance, in Psalm 119: 11 (“I have hidden your *word* in my heart ...”), we see *imrah*, which means a commandment or speech. Philippians 2:16 says, “... as you hold out the *word* of life ...” That’s from the Greek, *logos*, meaning thought or reasoning, just as it is in Colossians 3:16 (“Let the *word* of Christ dwell in you richly...”).

Jesus, Himself, said in John 14:23 (as rendered by the NASB), “If anyone loves Me, he will keep my *word*...” There we see *rhema*, teachings or utterances. All these thoughts are, of course, fully realized in the divinely fulfilled *Logos*, the Word of John 1.

But our main concern today is in “word” as it’s found in our theme verse. That’s *dabar* in Hebrew, and of its possible implications, it can mean “advice or answer.” Couple that with “timely,” and we begin to see how wisdom in our speech really affects daily living.

Saying the right thing at just the right time blesses both the hearer and the speaker. Timely words of encouragement, reconciliation, love or even correction benefit the Body and build up the Church. Appropriateness is always the key here.

So, pray that your words will be beneficial words, words of blessing, timely words.

DISCUSS

How often do you find yourself speaking before thinking or praying?
Is there someone you can think of right now that needs a timely word of blessing?

ENTER THE RANKS OF THE WISE

He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise. (PROVERBS 15:31)

Most of us have attended some sort of ceremony that honors an individual, or group of individuals, for an outstanding accomplishment or maybe a lifetime of fruitful service. While references might be made to the sacrifices that led up to this recognition, no one but the honoree(s) will ever truly know the nitty-gritty selflessness involved.

By this time in our study of Proverbs, I think you'd agree that it would be quite an honor, indeed, to be counted among The Wise; to be recognized as one who has thirsted for (and sacrificed much in order to attain) wisdom. Fortunately, the last 3 verses of chapter 15 share a little of what it takes to enter the ranks of the wise. It's not easy, but it's worth it.

Listening to (and heeding) rebuke is not only wise, it's life-giving.

Ignoring discipline (or moral correction) can result in the devastation of relationships and even of life itself.

The fear of the Lord is not only the beginning of wisdom, but remains our life-long teacher of wisdom.

Humility (which is a direct result of fearing God) naturally accompanies wisdom and precedes any rightful honor.

DISCUSS

How are you at

- 1) listening to and heeding honest rebuke?
- 2) receiving and maintaining discipline?
- 3) fearing God; holding Him in His rightful place of honor?
- 4) maintaining a humble, teachable spirit?

A TRUE COMMITMENT

Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. (PROVERBS 16:3)

A few decades ago, Earl and Hazel Lee, a Nazarene missionary and pastoral couple, wrote a short but intriguing book, *The Cycle of Victorious Living*. In it, they outline this “cycle” based on the instruction of Psalm 37. Basically, the cycle is this: Commit, Trust, Delight, Rest. The first step is commitment.

There are now thousands of books and blogs on business strategies and motivational techniques. Many of these are aimed at stirring up the dreams and firing up the creativity of the individual reading them. And all that's good, but I like what Psalm 37: 5 & 6 says about getting the ball rolling:

*Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this:
He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.*

You may recall the discussion Moses had with God as recorded in Exodus 33. In essence, Moses was saying, “Lord, you've commanded me to lead these people, and I will. But I can't do this by myself. You've never told me who You'll send to assist me, to walk with me, to see this plan through.”

Then God responds: “*My presence* will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

It's easy to recognize and acknowledge God's presence in our worship alongside other believers. However, it's a different matter to seek Him and to see Him in the everyday; to commit to Him the desires of our heart; to allow Him to shape the attitudes of our spirit; to commit to Him each day the work of our hands.

Commit ... Trust ... Delight ... Rest.

DISCUSS

What plans do you need to commit to God right now, at the start?

How can you become more aware of God's presence outside the realm of corporate worship?

LET'S GET MESSY

It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way.
(PROVERBS 19:2)

Life is all about balance, isn't it? A little of this, a little of that. Moderation in all things. We aim for a "well-rounded" education. We've even begun striving for "blended" worship services, incorporating the old along with the new.

"It is not good to have zeal without knowledge," says Proverbs 19. Nowhere is this more true, or more vital, than in our worship of God. Obviously, we'll never fully understand or comprehend God - "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" (Romans 11:34) But our singing, our speaking and our praying can't be based simply on our feelings. We have to get to the point where we're honestly responding to God for all He is and for all He's done, with knowledge gained as best we can, through the revealing of Himself through His word.

Then we begin to understand the sacredness of singing, "Here I raise mine Ebenezer." And we can discern the context of singing Isaac Watts' "Before Jehovah's Awful Throne." And we accept that singing about an intimate relationship with God has some innate requirements on our end.

You're familiar with Jesus' statement that the Father is seeking worshipers (you and me) who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. A pastor friend of mine says that worshiping in spirit alone leads to shallow emotionalism. While worshiping in truth alone leads to a dead orthodoxy.

It is not good to have zeal without knowledge.

DISCUSS

Is your worship balanced with zeal *and* knowledge?
What seems lacking? How can you adjust that?

CHARACTER TRAITS

A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is his glory to overlook an offense.

(PROVERBS 19:11)

Here's one thing I know for a fact to be true: Those qualities and character traits we long to be known for (fidelity, honesty, graciousness, patience), will never have the chance to be developed in us until they are tested.

How can we be honest until we've had the opportunity to be dishonest?

How can we extend grace until we've been hurt, mistreated or offended?

And how can we demonstrate patience until it's been tried?

If you're drawing a breath right now, then you know exactly what I'm talking about. The testing may have occurred at home. It may have been among those on your ministry team at church. Or you could have experienced this in the workplace or marketplace outside the walls of your congregation. And it could be that it happened today!

How do we deal with these tests or these trials? How do we develop and maintain those godly traits we want desperately to be evidenced in our lives? Well, here's a time-tested word of advice, brimming with authority and effectiveness:

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up... Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4: 25,26,29&30)

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2: 3,4)

DISCUSS

What qualities or character traits need to be developed more fully in you,
so that you can minister more effectively?

Are you willing to pray for the chance to develop them?

THE BEST LAID PLANS

Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.

(PROVERBS 19:21)

I'm a big believer in planning. I'm a proponent of organization. I strive for orderliness. I don't always perfectly execute these ideals, but I've discovered my life runs more smoothly and effectively when there's planning, organization and orderliness involved. I think maybe it's related to that "boundaries give us freedom" idea we talked about earlier.

And these 3 characteristics – planning, organization, orderliness – are particularly helpful when I'm working with other people, either in the music publishing world or in ministry areas of my church. Everyone appreciates a well thought out strategy and everyone likes to be kept in the loop.

On the other hand (you knew this was coming, didn't you?), I like spontaneity, too. I love those serendipitous moments when something totally unexpected happens and we see or experience things in a new way. Like when a worship service has been thought through, planned and rehearsed, then right in the middle of it, God breaks in. Suddenly a song lyric takes on a fresh meaning and our focus is shifted. Or a scripture passage speaks to us in a new way and we see God in a new light. Or maybe the presence of God just becomes so real – demanding our attention and response – that whatever it was we planned now seems shallow and trivial.

I'm learning to acknowledge those moments. And I'm learning to appreciate those moments. I'm even learning to anticipate them.

DISCUSS

When was the last time God broke through your planning?
Are you acknowledging, appreciating and anticipating those times?