



RICHARD MAYHUE

PRACTICING PROVERBS

WISE LIVING FOR FOOLISH TIMES



CHRISTIAN FOCUS





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DEDICATION

To James Patrick, the newest Mayhue, with a grandfather's prayer
that your life will be shaped by Proverbs' spiritual chisels to
resemble the One in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom
and knowledge (Colossians 2:3).





INTRODUCTION



American and British literature contains thousands of proverbs. They represent a potpourri of time-tested, common-sense aphorisms, many of which have their origins in other countries and date even before the actual establishment of America as a sovereign nation. I remember reading about an elementary school teacher who, wanting to convey creatively some of these national and international proverbs to her students, decided to provide the first part of the proverb and then have her young learners fill in the remainder. One little girl received, “A bird in the hand...” The teacher expected to hear, “...is worth two in the bush,” but this youngster blurted out “...is sure to go to the bathroom!” While I am certain that there is truth in both versions, I want to write about the Jewish Proverbs of Scripture with a far more serious intent than comes from this humorous incident or even from helpful proverbs of mere human origin.



I first visited Russia (then the USSR) in February 1991, and have returned several times since (now a part of the Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS]). It struck me then that here stands a prominent nation which desperately needs a completely new set of absolute ethical and moral principles, i.e. Proverbs, to guide both the government and the people as they transition through violently dramatic spiritual, economic, political, ethical, and social upheavals, caused partly by their many decades of government-imposed, national atheism.

The same need exists in my own country – the United States of America. If I had one message to give the CEOs, educators, political leaders, media pundits, and social scientists of our day, it would be the teaching of Proverbs, which majors on making one wise unto

salvation in Jesus Christ (Prov 30:2–4; 2 Tim 3:14–15) and teaching the wisest way to live for God’s glory.

Proverbs’ clear message rings so compellingly and powerfully that one commentator of another era (Charles Bridges, *A Commentary on Proverbs*, xiv) concluded, “Doubtless, if the world were governed by the whole wisdom of this single book, it would be a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” If Proverbs’ wisdom has the potential to change the entire world, imagine what it could do for you and your family.

What a noble motivation to start learning about God’s wisdom! With that in mind, I have prepared *Practicing Proverbs* for you who personally want to embrace and deposit God’s eternal wisdom (Proverbs) in your own life or in the life of someone else for whom you spiritually care. The format has matured slowly over the years – fueled by my fascination with the sanctified practicality of Proverbs, but also by my frustration over the lack of usable discipleship/devotional material with substance to guide one’s study through this inexhaustible treasury of wisdom.

Almost all volumes on Proverbs present their material either in commentary form or in abridged, selected-topics form that lacks the maximum value of a comprehensive, unabridged, thematic presentation that enables the reader to gain closure on any given topic. Currently, to the best of my knowledge, no such book exists in print like *Practicing Proverbs*, which easily allows the reader full access to Proverbs’ practical riches.

Practicing Proverbs intends to be a guide to glorifying God¹ by living wisely. Paul writes, “So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). Every part of a Christian’s life should be dedicated to this honorable end.

Practicing Proverbs delivers the complete content of the greatest collection of divine wisdom ever written. This book’s layout presents

1. For an expanded discussion about “glorifying God,” see Richard Mayhue, *Seeking God: How to Develop an Intimate Spiritual Relationship* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000), 227–233.



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God's wisdom in a life-related format with 52 themes organized under six life applications. Because much of Proverbs can be understood at face value, the presentation provides no commentary, although several accompanying introductory/explanatory chapters add related historical and biblical points of interest. Additional bibliographic resources appear below which can aid the reader when undertaking expanded studies. Five indexes will assist the user to find quickly the verse(s) or section needed. The sample **Strategy for Spiritual Success Worksheet** will equip you to keep a Proverbs diary of sorts to record your spiritual progress. Every quoted Scripture comes from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

Practicing Proverbs represents the most multi-audience book I have ever written – actually nine books in one. First, it can be employed as a devotional book for family or personal use. Second, it is a discipleship book to be used in the local church, small groups, or family discipleship. Third, it provides a Bible study book that can be selected for group study on Sunday or during the week. Fourth, it supplies a biblical counseling book that will serve not only as a ready reference for the counselor, but also as a help for the counselee. Fifth, it acts as a grandparent's book, i.e. a volume from which to pass on eternal wisdom to grandchildren. Sixth, it serves as a Proverbs illustration book for pastors and Bible teachers who are looking to shed light on ethical teachings found elsewhere in the Old and New Testaments. Seventh, it functions as a reference volume for pastors, Sunday school teachers, or individuals to pull together rapidly all of the Proverbs on a particular topic. Eighth, it comes as a ready-made resource for the Christian school teacher and missionary to teach ethics, morality, and values from a biblical perspective. Ninth, it can be enlisted by a nation's, state's, or city's school system to teach a Christian perspective on living.

Let me suggest that you begin mastering God's wisdom with a basic, thirteen-month approach to *Practicing Proverbs*. First, take one month and read one chapter of Proverbs each day. This will acquaint you with the content. Second, take the next year to study each of the fifty-two themes developed in this book, according to the plan outlined in the

Devotional Index. Record your thoughts, conclusions, and intentions on the **Strategy for Spiritual Success Worksheet** (sample included at the back of this book). By the end of the year, you should begin to have a firm grip on God's wisdom. Then, keep yourself refreshed by annually reading through Proverbs, one chapter a day, in one month.

I recommend the following resources to enhance your study of Proverbs and to provide help with verses that are hard to understand.

Alden, Robert L. *Proverbs: A Commentary on an Ancient Book of Timeless Advice*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983.

Bridges, Charles. *A Commentary on Proverbs*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979, rpt. of 1846 ed.

Bullock, C. Hassell. *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*. rev. ed. Chicago, IL: Moody, 1988.

Goldberg, Louis. *The Practical Wisdom of Proverbs*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999.

House, H. Wayne and Kenneth M. Durham. *Living Wisely in a Foolish World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1997.

Kidner, Derek. *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1969.

Lane, Eric. *Proverbs*. Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1999.

MacArthur, John. *Successful Christian Parenting*. Nashville, TN: Word, 1998. Especially Chapter Four, "Teaching Your Children Wisdom," 69–104.

Morris, Henry M. *The Remarkable Wisdom of Solomon*. Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2001.

Stevenson, Peter A. *A Commentary on Proverbs*. Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2001.

Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Skillful*. Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1995.

Zuck, Roy B. ed. *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995.

To help you see how *Practicing Proverbs* unfolds, here is a preview. It begins with the bittersweet autobiography of Solomon who wrote



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most of Proverbs. The wisest man ever to live recounts how he failed **Wisdom's Final Exam** in Ecclesiastes, even though he personally authored the textbook. Next comes an introduction to **Wisdom's Only Authorized Textbook** that answers some of the most often asked questions about Proverbs' background. Following this, **Wisdom's Beginning** points to the unique starting place for anyone who truly seeks to be wise. Then, **Wisdom's Wind** explains various features of wisdom, extending from "where to find it" all the way to "how it is acquired." **Wisdom's Way Is Best**, a repeated theme in Proverbs, completes the first five chapters.

The final six chapters of *Practicing Proverbs* do not discuss the Proverbs, but rather they contain the actual Proverbs rearranged from the biblical order into life situations catalogued by various proverbial themes. Organized into six life-applications – spiritual, personal, family, intellectual, marketplace, and societal, the 915 verses of Proverbs showcase 52 themes.

Now, the best way to begin your quest for God's wisdom starts with the author of Proverbs and his unique life. You can learn much from Solomon's failure to pass **Wisdom's Final Exam**.

Richard Mayhue
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