

TALKING POINTS 10

Monday (Proverbs 28:10 RSV)

U is for Upright: *Those who mislead the upright into evil ways will fall into pits of their own making.*

Sometimes we feel life is not fair. We see evil people succeeding. They are rich or popular. Meanwhile we know that some of those who follow God most closely are suffering. Others are deciding that they have no choice but to do what these wicked leaders say so they can have jobs or food or success. God doesn't seem to stop the wicked people from getting what they want.

This problem has been around for centuries. Although many of the psalms he wrote are full of praise for God, even King David often struggled with envy as he watched the arrogant or wicked people go ahead in life (see Ps 73).

Like the writer of this Proverb, however, David learned that in the end wickedness does not pay. Those who make life tough for honest people will slip in the end. We may not see this happen in this life, but the day will come when they will have to face God. He will judge them then, seeing them for what they are. No one who insists on being wicked can enter God's kingdom.

God is always fair – it just sometimes takes a while before we see this.

Tuesday (Proverbs 25:20)

V is for vinegar

You may sing songs to a troubled heart. But that's like taking a coat away on a cold day. It's like pouring vinegar on baking soda.

Go on. Try it: Take a teaspoonful of bicarb (as we call it here in South Africa) and then stir in 2 tablespoons of vinegar. You will see that it froths up nicely at first, but then the froth dies away leaving one with nothing much to show for one's experiment. And that is why this modern version of the proverb uses bicarb and vinegar to make a point.

The wise writer knows that it is not wrong to be sad or sorrowful. Jesus himself wept at Lazarus' grave (John 11:35) and he expresses his sadness about how the people of Jerusalem are behaving (Matt 23:37).

Because grieving is important, it is silly to try to cheer people up without allowing them time to feel sad too. Faking cheerfulness is as useless as the vinegar and baking soda mixture. Encouraging fake cheerfulness is as unhealthy as taking someone's coat away when they need it to avoid a chill on a cold day.

So, let people cry and let them talk about their sadness. The time for cheering them up will come later. In time people will realise that God will bring joy and peace back into their lives. And that's when we can help to cheer them up.

Perhaps Psalm 30: 5 says it best of all: Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

Wednesday (Proverbs 27:19)

W is for water: When you look into water, you see a likeness of your face. When you look into your heart you see what you are really like.

If we want to check what we look like, we find a mirror. Depending on what we see there, we may decide to change what we are wearing or we might feel satisfied.

There were very few mirrors when this proverb was written. Those which existed didn't reflect very well as they were made out of polished stone, not glass. In those days the best way to see what one looked like was to look at one's reflection in a pond.

Everyone knew that, but of course the writer wasn't really interested in people's outward appearance. He was more concerned about how they behaved. He knew that it was very possible that a person who was praised for being kind or generous might just be putting on a 'show'. Others respected (or judged) them by what they saw. However, in reality, these people might be mean and unkind and uncaring. People don't always show their real selves.

These tricksters might fool others – but they can never fool God. The writer knew that it is God's opinion that matters and that God looks at the heart.

We should remember what happened when God told his prophet Samuel to find a new king for his people. God sent Samuel to the house of Jesse who organised that his seven sons be before him. Each one looked impressive, tall, strong and good-looking, But God reminded Samuel that he looks at the heart and so he told Samuel not to choose any of them (1 Sam 16:6-7). Eventually David, the youngest and least impressive, was brought in to meet Samuel. This was the one whose heart was right, and God chose him.

To check whether they meet God's high standards, people must examine their hearts, not at their reflection in a mirror of water.

Thursday (Proverbs 1:10 15)

X is for Wrong! *If sinners tempt you, don't give in to them.*

My Bible dictionary suggests that there is only one word beginning with X in the whole Bible and that is the name of a king, Xerxes –the ruler at the time of Esther.

But we are quite used to seeing X's! All teachers use an X to tell us that something is wrong with our working out or with our answer. Maybe we even use it when we don't have an eraser and yet we know that we went wrong. After all, most of us get things wrong at some time or another.

The writers of Proverbs know that we all make mistakes and do wrong things. That is why they collected these pieces of wisdom. They wanted people to discover how God wants them to live, how God wants us to behave. Sometimes they tell us what we *should* do, and on other occasions they tell us what *not* to do.

This mixture of 'Do's and 'Don't's' is repeated throughout the book. We could go through the whole of Proverbs, therefore, and mark each verse with a ✓ or an X to show which things would be right to do and which would be wrong. Some chapters would have huge numbers of X's!

The writers knew that we can never earn our way to heaven. No matter how hard we try we can never be good enough to reach God's standards. Wonderfully the time came – long after these wise writers were all dead - when God sent Jesus to be punished for our shortcomings, for our wrong doing, for our sinfulness. This means that we can be forgiven! However, we wouldn't be very nice children of God if we didn't want to show our love for our heavenly father – just as we generally want to please our earthly parents. And Proverbs aims to help us do just that.

Some of the X's in the book are for grown-ups or teenagers and we haven't talked about them. Maybe someday you will read those for yourself. But there are many things that we should avoid doing from a young age.

So don't go there! Keep away! Stay out!

Friday (Proverbs 4:10)

Y is for Years: *Accept what I say. Then you will live for many years.*

There are many verses in the Old Testament which tell us that those who keep God's commandments or who live according his ways will live for many years. Yet we know that some people live very long, although they are not God-fearing. We also know that some who follow God die when they are young. So we puzzle over how this fits in with what the Bible says.

Those who study the Bible come up with various explanations – all of which make sense. Some of these explanations involve understanding a lot about how the people of long ago thought about things. This is much too complicated for us to deal with here.

So let's look at the simple answer. We all know that we will die one day. When our body can't function any more, death will happen. Just like a machine, our body can get damaged or it can wear out. Rather than leave us to struggle on, God closes down our bodies.

But that isn't the end of life. There is a second instalment; there is a sequel! Whereas movie sequels are often not as good as the first movie, life's second instalment or second chapter is much better than the first for those who love God. We shall leave our bodies behind, just as a butterfly leaves its cocoon. And like the butterfly, we won't need these old worn down bodies in our new life.

In fact, death is the beginning of real life. God promises that those who love him and respect him will have a new life which will be much more wonderful, much more special than our life here can ever be (John 14:1-3). We shall live not just for "many years", but for ever as God's beloved children.

God's pathways will lead us there at just the right time.

Saturday (Proverbs 2:1-12a)

Z is for Zoom lens

No you won't find this term anywhere in Proverbs! They hadn't even invented cameras by then, let alone a zoom lens. I have used it because this book helps us to **zoom** in to God's rules.

Long before these passages were written, God had given his people the Ten Commandments – ten rules or manufacturer's instructions – so that they would be able to live life to the full. Six of these commandments told them how they should treat others. But gradually people had forgotten to obey these rules. The book of Exodus tells us how God expanded on these 1-line rules for Moses and the Israelites.

By the time the book of Proverbs was written, people heard these rules so often, they had begun to ignore some of these details. This led the wise writers to re-say or to explain God's instructions again, using different word pictures so that people would sit up and take notice of them once again. They wanted to ensure that God's people knew that keeping God's laws meant thinking about others in every circumstance, every day.

Of course no-one is able to be wise and sensitive all the time. The people of those days didn't get it right, and neither will any of us. Does this mean we cannot be children of God?

NO! And here is another fact we need to zoom in on:

Many years after these sayings were written down, Jesus, came to live on earth. He explained God's ways better than the writers of Proverbs could ever have done. After all, he was God's son and had helped to shape these instructions.

Jesus didn't just talk about how to obey God; he showed God's way by living a perfect life of caring and kindness. Then, because he loves the whole world, he offered to be punished for all the wrong things that everyone in the world has done throughout history – right up to today. Those who love him are included in his clean-up. This means that we can be sure that we are accepted as God's children even though we still sin and get things very wrong.

To show how grateful we are for this gift of forgiveness, Christians want to be as like Jesus as possible. These wise words in Proverbs can help us to do that.

Proverbs tells us a great deal about how we should behave towards others. But like the ten Commandments it first lays down what our relationship with God should be like. Unless we

get that right, all the other instructions we have read will be just a long list of Do's and Don'ts.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Do not depend on your own understanding. In all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.