

PURSUE THE RIGHT PATH IN LIFE

PROVERBS 04: 10–19

Introduction

“Repetition is the key to learning.” Although the original source of this saying is not known, its use and acceptance lend credibility to its accuracy. Solomon’s chief method of instructing his son in *Proverbs* implies his agreement with it. In this first division of *Proverbs* (chs. 1-9), a father’s instructions to his son, Solomon uses a number of teaching tools. His primary tool is repetition. Thus, the lessons from this father have many elements in common:

- the charge to listen, to pay attention to his teaching
- the equating of his teaching to God’s Word and commandments (laws)
- the charge to get wisdom and to grow in wisdom
- the benefits of wisdom
- the value of wisdom
- the dangers of rejecting wisdom

These lessons were crucial to his son’s training because they had the potential to be life-changing. Apparently, Solomon was driven to make sure his son followed the LORD and the path of wisdom throughout life. Therefore, he repeated the above themes in every lesson. And though he conveyed these lessons in a variety of ways, the basic truths still stand out. It is key to realize that even though the verses are repetitive, they are not redundant or meaningless. Every mention is inspired by God’s Holy Spirit. Every mention reinforces them in the mind and, more importantly, in the heart of the reader. Hence, the reader must be careful not to pass over them because of their repetition.

Chapter four reveals an additional motivation for Solomon’s sense of urgency: he was God’s steward. Therefore, he was to pass on his remarkable spiritual heritage, not only to his son but also to future generations. He knew the importance of communicating God’s truth in such a way that it might be preserved for future generations. This is, *The Wise Path of Life (Part 5): Obey Your Parents’ Instructions*, Proverbs 4:1-27.

- I. Listen to your parents’ wise advice (vv. 1-9).
- II. Pursue the right path in life (vv. 10-19).
- III. Keep on the straight, righteous path (vv. 20-27).

Proverbs 04:10–19 Pursue the Right Path in Life

As the father continues his instruction, his focus remains on his son. He returns to a familiar theme, a theme that young men and women need to constantly remember. It is the admonition to choose the right path in life, to stay on the right road. Once more, this loving father shows his son (daughter) the critical choice he must make as he faces the crossroads of life:

- => the way of wisdom versus the way of wickedness
- => the road of righteousness versus the road of rebellion
- => the path of prudence, prosperity and peace versus the path of perversity, peril and punishment

The young man must make a choice that every individual faces at some point: Will he live a life of wilful submission to God and trust (fear) Him? Or, will he live a life of woeful slavery to sin? A deep sense of urgency is evident in the father's tone.

The book of *Proverbs* does not tell us the specific setting of these wise lessons. We know they are the lessons of Solomon to his son, and we know from the historical books of the Old Testament a great deal about one of Solomon's sons: his successor, Rehoboam. Rehoboam chose a life of wickedness and folly. Could it be that his father detected his leaning toward the perverse path in his early years? Perhaps as a teenager he ran with the rebellious crowd or revealed tendencies toward foolishness. Perhaps he displayed the attitude of a scorner, making light of God's Word, His holy commandments. Whatever the case, this lesson was a passionate attempt to keep Rehoboam on the right path, a strong warning about the consequences he would suffer if he continued down the path he was following.

1. *Proverbs 04:10 Hear and You will Live Long*

Solomon again demands his son's attention, directing him to hear what he is saying (v. 10a; 1:8; 4:1). He pleads with his son to receive his words (1:3; 2:1). It is not enough to merely listen; he must accept and apply this wisdom to his life. This is emphasized in the double plea: *hear* (shama) includes obedience, and *receive* (laqach) means to take these lessons and make them an integral part of life.

The father reminds his son that wisdom is the key to a long life (v. 10b). The reverse of this statement is true as well: wickedness leads to an abbreviated lifespan. Of course, there are exceptions to both of these statements, but, in general, they are true. How is it true that the road of rebellion against God's Word cuts life short?

- => The dangers of the road claim many lives. Sin results in death — not just spiritual death but also physical death (Rom 5:12, 6:23; Jas 1:15). The natural consequences of sin often result in premature death, for instance, in an accident brought on by drinking or drugs, a sin-induced disease, or from the stress of a sinful, guilt-laden lifestyle. All of us have seen people who appear far older than their years due to a hard life of sin.
- => The legal consequences of sin end some lives prematurely. Under Jewish law, execution was the penalty for various sins. In many nations of the world today, capital punishment is still in force, usually for the crime of murder.
- => Sometimes, the lives of the wicked are prematurely ended by the defensive or vengeful actions of their victims. Not all who are attacked are afraid to fight back;

many people will defend themselves. Some victims will take justice into their own hands. At other times, the loved ones of victims taken by violent crimes seek retribution on their own.

2. Proverbs 04: 11–12 Walk in the Straight, Righteous Path

Here is the father's passionate plea: stay on the right path. "I have taught" and "I have led" are references to the father's previous admonitions and instructions. They refer to rules given at some other time, and they testify to the father's urgency at this point.

Taught (*horetika*) (v. 11) is related to the torah, or God's law — His Holy Word. What the father has taught his son is God's law, the way of God's wisdom. This way is not automatically found. The instincts of human nature are toward the way of foolishness. People must be led to the right path. The father emphasizes that he has brought his son to the right path and that is as far as he can go. He cannot drag his son down the road. The son must decide for himself to travel the road of righteousness through life. Again, the father reminds his son why he must choose this path:

- a. It is the path of wisdom — the right path (v. 11).
- b. It is the safe and secure path (v. 12). The path of righteousness is a proven, hazard-free path. When a son (or daughter) walks along the path of righteousness, he is not hindered, obstructed or restricted by bumps, holes or obstacles along the way. In fact, he can run if he chooses. Notice the contrast between walking and running. A rough road would require the son to *walk* not run. He would need to take each step slowly and deliberately. This is not true of the safe and secure path, the path of wisdom and righteousness. It is proven; therefore, it is not necessary to carefully watch every step. The son can run freely with the wind at his back. He need not fear a sprained ankle, a broken leg or any of the injuries caused by tripping or stumbling (Psa 18:36; 119:32,165).
- c. It is the key to life (v. 13). It is the living path. Again, the father does not tell his son that wisdom will give him a good and happy life. He tells him that wisdom is life. He is not speaking here of quality of life, but of life itself. The path of wisdom is a matter of life or death. If he does not choose the way of wisdom, *he will die!*

3. Proverbs 04: 14–19 Do not Walk — Not Even Set Foot — on the Path of the Wicked

The reader can feel the father's urgency building as it reaches this point. Furthermore, we may assume that the father is pleading both tenderly and tearfully. In a passionate, determined attempt to deter his son from the way of death, the father slings nine powerful directives at his son in rapid-fire fashion:

=> Grasp this warning and correction (v. 13a)!

=> Do not let go of it — do not slacken or weaken your grip on it (v. 13b)!

- => Keep and guard it (v. 13c)!
- => Do not start on the wicked path — do not even take one step on it (v. 14a)!
- => Do not veer off the right path; do not follow in the way of evil men (v. 14b)!
- => Avoid the evil path altogether! Leave it alone! (v. 15a)!
- => Stay away from the evil path! Do not even go near it (v. 15b)!
- => Turn away from the evil path! Go in the opposite direction (v. 15c)!
- => Keep moving past the evil path and continue on your way (v. 15d)!

The father catches his breath, shines the light down the way of wickedness, and gives his son a glimpse of the travellers stranded on the road (vv. 16-19). Many are reprehensible, vile and despicable; others are heartbreaking and pitiable.

They are restless, unable to sleep because of their wicked cravings (v. 16). They have an insatiable appetite for evil. They find their contentment and satisfaction in bringing harm to others, and they cannot rest until their sinful, violent lusts are appeased. The fountain of evil within them continually builds up pressure that must be released. Others lie awake because their minds are rushing to plot the next day's activities of evil deeds — profit and pleasure gained at the expense of others, their victims (Mica 2:1).

These contemptible characters are addicted to evil. Their lives revolve around iniquity. Wickedness is their food and drink (v. 17). They exist off a steady diet of depravity. Evil is their bread (v. 17a):

- => For some, sin is the *sustenance of their lives*. Bread represents food in general, all that is taken for nourishment. These feed themselves from an endless buffet of sin. They must have it to live. They cannot exist without it. They have chosen to feed and indulge the old nature to the point that it has grown into a ravenous beast that constantly growls for more. As an illustration, think of any addiction: alcohol, drugs, sex, gluttony, covetousness, the love of money, greed and a host of other addictions.
- => For others, sin is the *source of their livelihood*. They earn their bread at the expense of others. Some of their benefactors are helpless and defenceless victims who are powerless to free themselves from the claws of the wicked. Others choose to sample the seductive wares of the wicked and are now slaves to the products they sell. These vice vendors are the alcohol manufacturers and distributors, the casino owners, the drug dealers, the pornographers, the pimps, the child exploiters, the slave owners, the employers who pay unjust wages, the dishonest financial managers...the list goes on and on. These are they who commit crimes in order to live.

Their wine — their drink — is violence (v. 17b). Excellent commentator Bruce K. Waltke observes,

The colour of the wine in the metaphor matches the blood of their victims in reality. Moreover, the exceptional [Hebrew] plural may invite a comparison between the

crushing of many grapes for a glass of wine and the killing of many victims to put wine on the table. (Bruce K. Waltke. *The Book of Proverbs*, p. 291.)

The road of the righteous is nothing like the powerful path of perversity (vv. 18-19). It is a clear path, a secure path and those who travel on it walk in the light (v. 18; John 1:4-5; John 8:12; Eph 5:8; 1 John 1:7). They are not slave owners, slave drivers nor slaves to sin. They freely walk and joyfully submit themselves to the service of their LORD and others. The light that illuminates their path grows brighter and brighter as they journey, like the sun dawning upon the new day.

The way of the wicked, in contrast, is a dark, dangerous road (v. 19). Those who choose this path blindly stumble upon the holes, rocks and other hazards because they walk in darkness — the endless, eternal path of a life of sin. At the end of the road is a cliff. Those who grope in darkness cannot see it ahead, and when they reach the end of the road, they suddenly and unexpectedly drop off into the abyss below, the bottomless pit the Bible ominously calls *hell*.

Thought 1. Notice again the personification of wisdom in verse 13. Remember, *personification* simply means attributing human qualities to an abstract notion or object. So, again, wisdom personified is Christ; wisdom equals Christ. Now notice the logical progression in this verse: wisdom equals *life*. If wisdom equals Christ, and wisdom equals life, then Christ equals life. The completed revelation of the New Testament again shines on this wonderful truth in *Proverbs*:

John 1:4-5 *In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.*

John 10:10 *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”*

John 11:25 *Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.”*

John 14:6 *Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

Col 3:4 *When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

1 John 5:11-12 *And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.*

Thought 2. The wretched and heartbroken individuals stranded on the path of wickedness are slaves to sin. They are slaves to the depraved and evil lifestyles peddled by those who earn their bread at the expense of others. This includes, but is not limited to...

- the drug addicts
- the tobacco addicts
- the alcoholics
- the pornography addicts
- the sex addicts
- the gambling addicts

Many of these take great pleasure in the sins that hold them captive. They delight in their iniquity and have no desire to change. Others, however, desire a better life, but cannot break the chains of sin that bind them. They cry out for help. They go through rehabilitation programmes. They attend support groups. They receive counselling and therapy. Yet, they never completely escape their prisons of dependency.

Most likely, the majority of these took their first step on the path of wickedness when they were teenagers. Whether they gave in to peer pressure, experimented to satisfy their curiosity, or just wanted to have a little fun is irrelevant once the step has been taken. The point is, one step led to another, and another...now they are captives.

Pastors, parents, counsellors, mentors — any who are in a position to influence the young — must strongly proclaim, as Solomon did to his son, the perils in following the path of sin. We must do all within our power to keep our young people from taking the first step down the road of rebellion and wickedness. And, as we do all that we can, we must realize that we can only lead them to the right path; we cannot force them to take it. Therefore, we must bombard the throne of grace with intercessory prayers on their behalf.

2 Cor 6:14 *Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?*

1 Th 5:22 *Avoid every kind of evil.*

1 Pet 3:10-12 *For, “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech.” He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.*

Deut 30:19 *This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.*

Psa 1:1 *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers.*

Isa 30:21 *Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.”*

Thought 3. Pastor John A. Kitchen offers this outstanding commentary on verse fifteen:

The four verbs used here provide a wonderful strategy for fighting off temptation.

First, we must “avoid” temptation. When temptation is near, we must steer as wide a

path away as possible. Do not make eye contact (Prov 4:25; 6:13,25; 10:10; 16:30). Cross the street and give it a wide berth (Prov 5:8; Job 11:14).

Second, we must not “pass by” temptation. While temptation may spring up and entice us unawares, there are also areas of temptation we know we are vulnerable to. We must calculate and construct our steps each day so as to stay as distant as possible from those temptations that we know may hound us.

Third, we must activate our will and immediately “turn away” from the enticement of sin when confronted by it. To linger over temptation, to delay decision regarding it is to walk headlong into its trap (Psa 119:60).

Fourth, we must “pass on” once we have made the decision not to imbibe in the wanton pleasure of some allurements. Walk and keep walking. Do not contemplate the fleeting pleasure that might have been yours, if the decision had been different (Col 3:1; Phil 4:8). To look back after your hand has been put to the plough is to disqualify yourself (Luke 9:62; Rom 6:21-23; Col 3:5). (John A. Kitchen. Proverbs: A Mentor Commentary, p. 108) ■