



# Practical Wisdom

## Lenten Study

### Day 1

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**Read: Proverbs 1:1-7**

#### Introduction

As Lent begins we once again have an opportunity to do some self-examination. Lent is a penitential season in which we are encouraged to look at our lives to see the extent to which we are living in accordance with God's will. This Lent we will seek to fulfill this objective by considering the wisdom in Proverbs.

A few years ago Dr. Richard Carlson wrote a bestseller entitled *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*. In it he deals with the common ways in which people live their lives, some to their joy and others to their detriment. His purpose is to help people discover the errors in their thinking and acting that keep them from reaching their potential and better enjoying life. While relying primarily on Scripture to deal with the issues that will surface in this Lenten study, I will also draw from Carlson's thoughts. The anticipated result is practical wisdom.

Our reading for today is the Prologue to the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is attributed to King Solomon, the third king of Israel and the son of King David. He is reputed to be one of the wisest men who ever lived. The Prologue sets the theme and purpose of the book.

A footnote in the *Life Application Bible* says this: "Proverbs gives practical suggestions for effective living. The book is not just a collection of homey sayings; it contains deep spiritual insights drawn from experience. A proverb is a short, wise, easy-to-learn saying that calls a person to action. It doesn't argue about basic spiritual and moral beliefs; it assumes we already hold them. The book of Proverbs focuses on God—his character, works, and blessings—and it tells how we can live in closer relationship with him."

*R&D What has been your past experience with the book of Proverbs? What place does it hold in your spiritual life?*

*Prayer: Lord, this Lent, help me to see myself more clearly and to better understand the way You would have me go.*

### Day 2

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**Read: Proverbs 3:5-8**

#### Don't Be Wise in Your Own Eyes

Our reading for today is a "first things first" message. Wisdom begins by trusting in the Lord rather than leaning on our own understanding. God knows what is best for us. When we are faced with a decision, making it in accordance with His will is the priority. We come to know God's will by our study of Scripture and applying what we receive from God to our everyday lives.

Solomon tells us to acknowledge God in all our ways. This involves turning our lives over to Him in every particular. It is the same thing Jesus was saying in Matthew 6:33: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." We need to

examine our priorities, values, and lifestyle. What is really important to us? What areas of our life have we failed to open to Him? In what areas do we, instead, seek to be wise in our own eyes?

We should always be open to correction by God, and God's correction sometimes comes through the words and actions of other people. Too often we want to be right at the expense of the thoughts and feelings of others. We're wise in our own eyes and that's good enough for us! God, on the other hand, wants us to be teachable and reasonable in our relationship with others. Our ministry as Christians is to be reconciling the world to God (2 Corinthians 6:18-19); and, to do that, we can ill afford to be haughty and all-knowing.

If we step on some else's point of view, we may miss learning something that God would like to teach us through the other person. Moreover, we tend to alienate others when we insist on being right all the time. We think we will feel better by putting the other person down. In truth we may come across as self-righteous and cause the other person to no longer like us or at least to become defensive toward us. It's better to trust in the Lord with all our heart and to be loving in our interpersonal relationships.

*R&D In what ways may I be a little too sure of myself to the detriment of others? What am I going to do about that?*

*Prayer: Help me, Lord, to trust in You with all my heart and not to lean on my own understanding.*

### **Day 3**

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**Read: Proverbs 3:11-12**

#### **The Lord's Discipline**

Sooner or later we find ourselves agreeing with that age-old truth: life isn't fair. Things don't always go our way no matter how much we love the Lord, and it is easy to look around us and see that many people have tougher situations to handle than we do. Sometimes we're feeling sorry for ourselves; at other times we are distraught on behalf of others. What are we to make of all of this?

The fact is that this life is not an end in itself. It's a training ground for eternity. If we are going to learn all that God has to teach us in this life, we had better be prepared for how He may do it. Discipline isn't a pleasant word. We don't like it, particularly when applied to ourselves. Discipline is, however, the way we can be taught and trained; it's what the word means. As has been well said, "God loves us just as we are, but He doesn't want us to stay that way." If we are going to learn the difference between right and wrong, God's loving discipline will show us the way.

When we get to feeling that life isn't fair, instead of feeling sorry for ourselves, it is time to see what God is trying to teach us. Sometimes the problem we face is the result of our own bad decisions or wrong actions. If that is the case and we don't get the message, God may well use guilt, crises, or another problem to get our attention. Of course, sometimes the matter to be dealt with is not the result of anything we have done. In that case, our response should be patience, trusting in the Lord to show us what to do.

There is also the situation in which the unfairness of life has not fallen on us but on others we know and love. This is our opportunity to show compassion to them as they work through their crisis. That is much more productive than pity, a self-defeating emotion that does nothing for anyone. Compassion, on the other hand, is a heartfelt emotion that can energize and lead to

constructive action. The discipline the Lord may be showing us in such situations is to get off the sidelines and get into the game.

*R&D In what ways may God be disciplining you through the circumstances of life?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to accept Your discipline, in gratitude rather than in resentment.*

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#### Day 4

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**Read: Proverbs 3:21-26**

#### Sound Judgment and Discernment

Today's reading is very comforting. If we exercise sound judgment and discernment, the results can be most beneficial. We can move forward in safety, sleep peacefully at night, be without fear, and have confidence in the Lord. It is the way to live.

Sound judgment is what we acquire from walking closely with the Lord and studying His word. It includes knowledge we gain from instruction, training, and—as we learned in our last lesson—discipline. Discernment is the ability to grasp something that would otherwise be obscure, and thereby to make right choices. Sound judgment and discernment are ways God equips us to deal with the issues we face in life.

Unfortunately, many of us allow ourselves to get worked up about all sorts of things that really don't matter. We focus on small stuff and allow these little things to get blown out of proportion. Somebody slights us in some way and we can't let go of it. We convince ourselves that we are justified in feeling the way we do and share our concern with others. We start focusing on what we should have said when the incident occurred, or we go so far as to plot how to get even. The whole thing makes us apprehensive, sleepless, fearful, and unable to be in a good relationship with the Lord.

This shows a lack of sound judgment and discernment. If we are to exercise wisdom in such situations, we will forgive the other person and move on with life. It is very freeing to have compassion for the other person and to realize that we may have been somewhat at fault or that there were other things going on in his life that caused him to say or do what he did. We can enhance our lives and be much more open to the Lord's guidance if we are not "sweating the small stuff" but allowing other people to be who they are.

*R&D Think of a situation you have recently faced in which you allowed yourself to get bent out of shape over something that really wasn't that important. What did you learn from the experience?*

*Prayer: Lord, please give me sound judgment and discernment.*

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#### Day 5

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**Read: Proverbs 3:27-28**

#### Do Good

The good we do to our neighbor is often of a reciprocal nature. We share with our neighbor the teaspoon of cinnamon she needs for a recipe. Our neighbor shares with us his leaf blower when we are cleaning our yard. These are the everyday sort of things that build good relationships. The practical wisdom in our reading for today is that we shouldn't withhold from our neighbor the things we have that can meet his needs. To delay in doing good is inconsiderate. Such an attitude

destroys trust. Being eager to do good, on the other hand, not only builds trust with those with whom we share, but also makes us feel good for its own sake.

There are other means of carrying out acts of kindness that have their own reward. My wife and I, for example, drive weekly for Meals on Wheels. The people to whom we make deliveries appreciate our effort, and there is general approval by others who know we do it. Our joy comes from knowing that it is the love of Jesus within us that impels us to perform this ministry. Multitudes of Christians are engaged in a wide variety of ministries every day under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

There is an even more rewarding way of doing good for someone else, and that is doing it anonymously. There is something very special about doing something thoughtful for another but never letting them know that we were the giver nor ever mentioning it to anyone else. When people know the good things we have done, the purity of the act is somehow slightly diluted. When only God knows, the gift is as precious as it can be. We not only enjoy what we have done, but God can use this selflessness to build our character.

*R&D When was the last time you made an anonymous gift? How did it make you feel?*

*Prayer: Help us, dear Lord, to build trust among our neighbors by acts of kindness.*

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## Day 6

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**Read: Proverbs 3:29-30**

### **Don't Harm Others**

Today's proverb is the other side of our last one. We should readily do good toward our neighbor, but we also shouldn't do him harm. It is easy for most of us to get exasperated with our neighbors over one thing or another from time to time. The closeness of the physical relationship—much the same as it is with family and co-workers—can bring out the worst in us. Neglect of their yard while we are trying to keep ours beautiful, their children (or ours!) being too noisy, and parties that go on too often or too boisterously are all possible sources of irritation. These are the kinds of things that can cause us to speak badly of our neighbor or to harbor ill feelings. There may be plenty of opportunities to place blame on our neighbors, yet we want harmony in the neighborhood. How do we exercise wisdom in these situations?

When something doesn't meet our expectations there is a tendency to blame the situation on someone else. That is especially true in relationships with our neighbors (defining that word in its broadest sense such as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan). Things aren't working out as they should and we are frustrated. We feel a need to blame someone rather than taking account of our own responsibility in whatever the matter is. The blame game started with Adam and Eve in the Garden and continues to be repeated in many facets of everyday life.

This kind of thinking tends to exonerate us from responsibility for our own actions, problems, or feelings. On a larger level it is manifested in frivolous lawsuits and civil and political unrest. Yet, in terms of personal wellbeing, we cannot find peace by blaming everyone else for what happens in our life. Although the actions of others do contribute to the situations that cause us anxiety and grief, we can only make peace within ourselves by rising above them and taking responsibility for our own feelings.

Some wonderful advice for dealing with blame comes from Dr. Henry Brandt. He once said to a friend of ours, "You are the only problem you will ever have. It's not the others around you or your circumstances. Now, there's great hope in that truth because you can take yourself to

God and be changed. You can't take anyone else to God. But they can benefit from the change in you."

*R&D Recall a vexing situation you faced with a neighbor and how you handled it. Would you do it differently today?*

*Prayer: Lord, help us to truly love our neighbors rather than finding fault in them.*

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## Day 7

**Read: Proverbs 4:23**

### Guard Your Heart

To grow in our relationship with the Lord, the place of personal receptivity is the heart. In the Bible the heart is the place of availability. Paul prays that Christ may dwell in our hearts (Ephesians 3:17). The heart is synonymous with our inner being (Ephesians 3:16) where the crucial issues of life are dealt with. The heart includes our innermost thoughts and our greatest aspirations. But we are also told in Scripture that "the heart is deceitful above all things" (Jeremiah 17:9). Just as it is capable of reaching to God it is also able to lead us astray. Thus, we need to guard our heart.

The way in which we guard our heart is to draw closer to God. Among other things, this means having a discipline of prayer and worship. To commune with the Lord, we need to provide both the quantity and quality of time necessary to do so. I well remember when I was a busy young executive telling a fellow Christian I just didn't have time for prayer in my busy day. "You do have an alarm clock, don't you?" was his wise response.

Set aside time every day to be with the Lord that He may help you guard your heart. Many people find it helpful to have quiet time with the Lord first thing in the morning. The day is ahead of us, and we can lift it up to the Lord. It is amazing how the difficult situations we think we will be facing during the day can be dealt with under the Lord's guidance. As we set these matters before God, we suddenly realize they are not really that important or we are inspired to see a way of dealing with them that has never occurred to us. Sometimes we just get peace about the situation for which there are no easy answers.

Whether our time with the Lord is in the morning or at another time during the day, this is the special way in which we can guard our heart. Time spent with Him is restorative, inspirational, and trust-building. It is the wellspring of life.

*R&D How much time do you spend with the Lord each day? What is the nature of this time? What are the results?*

*Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the privilege of being with You in precious moments of communion through prayer.*

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## Day 8

**Read: Proverbs 4:25-27**

### Look Straight Ahead

God wants us to concentrate on the desires that will keep us on the right path. Paul tells us to run in such a way as to get the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24). Don't run aimlessly, he goes on to say. The Christian life takes hard work, self-denial, and continual preparation. We need to make sure that our goals are in the right direction. We must build boundaries around our desires rather

than running around in emotional or spiritual circles. Stay focused, look straight ahead, fix our sights on God's will, and don't get sidetracked or distracted.

Just like being in the eye of a storm, we can find peace in the midst of the chaos around us. Having this kind of focus requires intention and practice. When we are facing situations in life that we know will be trying and could get us off track, there are some practical ways to deal with them. We can look at the situation as an opportunity rather than a problem. We can commit to being the one person who will stay focused on what God wants us to do regardless of what is going on with the others around us. We can decide that we will be a good listener rather than the one who has to do all the talking. Sticking to such an approach can have amazing results. If you find that this method works for you in one situation, try it in another.

Years ago I was vice president of a large company. I had brought to the attention of the leaders of our company a somewhat controversial matter that we needed to deal with. At the next Board meeting, it fell to me to make the initial presentation of the matter so it could be thoroughly discussed and resolved. After I had done so, it was as though the Lord let me be quiet and simply listen to what everyone said. I was at peace in the eye of the storm. At one point, it was as though the Lord spoke to me and said, "Now is this what you want to be doing the rest of your life or do you want to do what I have for you to do?" That episode led to my going into fulltime Christian work as a lay person. It was the path the Lord had for me and has been a great blessing in subsequent years.

*R&D What path does the Lord have you on, and how do you keep looking straight ahead?*

*Prayer: Heavenly Father, Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path (Psalm 119:105).*

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## Day 9

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**Read: Proverbs 6:6-8**

### Work Hard

Building on my personal reflections from the last study, in the early days of my vocational life I had the privilege of working with several of the top people in their fields of business and law. As an ambitious young man, I had the idea that all the routine work necessary to do a job well would one day lead to freedom from boring details. I envisioned top executives as being people who had risen above that work level and now had others to do their boring and routine chores. Once I had the opportunity to work with executives, however, I saw how wrong I had been. The work at the top is not only more pressurized than jobs at the lower level, but all of the annoying details are still there! They may be of a different nature, but bone-wearying hard work simply can't be avoided.

Our proverb for today cautions against laziness. Interestingly, it uses the ant—whose work must be about as boring and routine as anything we could think of—for the illustration of not being lazy but doing hard work. People need rest and sleep, and God gave us the Sabbath as a weekly day for rest and restoration. But we shouldn't rest when we are supposed to be working. Paul has some choice things to say about unwillingness to work in his second letter to the Thessalonians (see 3:6-13), the most direct being: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

As I write this, we are going through difficult economic times in our country; many are unemployed. It is heartening to see people who have had responsible jobs in the past rolling up their sleeves and undertaking whatever job they can find to provide for their families. In such times, we know we have to work hard to survive.

But what about the routine things? Do we fret about whose day it is to take the garbage out, or do we go ahead and do it ourselves? It's difficult to be a contented person if we are always keeping score on who is supposed to do what. Be glad that you are able to do something that relieves another person of having to do it. Remember the ant.

R&D *How would you score yourself on the subject of hard work?*

Prayer: *Help me, Lord, to gain wisdom from the work ethic of the ant.*

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## Day 10

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**Read: Proverbs 10:1**

### **Bring Joy to Your Father**

The subject of today's proverb is painful to me because my parents died while I was still a very young man and had not become a follower of Christ. On the other hand, primarily for that reason, I can encourage those whose parents are still alive to take special heed to this saying so that you will not have the regrets that I do. Our parents most likely made many sacrifices on our behalf and we owe them our love and respect.

One of the ways we can bring joy to the heart of our father and not grieve our mother is to rely on them for guidance in the major issues of life, to include them in on our key decisions. As young adults, this can mean letting them guide our education; later, consulting with them about the one we love and hope to marry; still later, apprising them of our vocational aims. In our day, people tend to change vocations, or at least jobs within vocations, several times during their life. These are prime times to consult with our parents if they are still alive. Our parents have lived longer and thus can be expected to have gained some wisdom that we do not yet have. The people closest to us know us best. They love us and care about our future. To leave them out of our key decisions does not bring joy to our father and can bring grief to our mother.

We can carry this further. We can go to our parents with all sorts of matters that affect our lives, not just those involving major decisions. The more we let them be involved, the more we are showing love to and respect for them. Although, as noted above, my parents died at a young age, my father's father lived to be almost 105. I did go to that godly man for advice as I would have to my father, and he remained wisely perceptive and tremendously supportive. As a result, I do believe I brought joy to him.

R&D *To what extent have you involved your parents in your life?*

Prayer: *Lord, my parents were a joy to me; may I have been more of a joy to them than I know.*

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## Day 11

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**Read: Proverbs 10:12**

### **Love Covers All Wrongs**

Our wise saying for today is that hate stirs up dissension but love covers all wrongs. Peter put it this way: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). We can get ourselves in a lot of trouble by saying and doing things that stir up ill feelings. To show love instead is certainly the wise solution.

It's easy to get out of sorts with individuals and groups, those within our family, or co-workers, even those with whom we worship. Misunderstandings occur, they say things we resent,

or their ideas seem totally contrary to what we believe. Arguments happen. Things we later wish we had not said, we say. Dissension is the result. What do we do about it?

If we have not had these experience ourselves, we all know stories of disagreements that have gotten out of hand and provoked long periods of bitterness. If this has happened to us, we know how difficult it is for each party to the dispute to reach out to the other. Doing so seems like admitting we were wrong when we still feel very strongly that we were right. But, would we rather continue to carry the bitterness and all the ramifications of being out of relationship with the other? It's not worth it. In my own experience, when I have initiated the attempt at reconciliation there have been wonderful results. The other person, who may have simply been an acquaintance at the time of the dispute, is suddenly a friend. We have weathered a storm together and a new bond exists between us.

Of course, the best policy is show love to the other person before stirring up dissension in the first place. But sometimes, even when we have the best of intentions, it happens anyway. When it does, swallow your pride, remember that you are a Christian, and reach out to the other. Love covers all wrongs.

*R&D When have you faced a situation of trying to heal a disagreement that arose between you and another? What happened as a result?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, you have told us to love one another and you have called us all to a ministry of reconciliation. Help us to be obedient to these commands.*

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## Day 12

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**Read: Proverbs 10:17**

### **Heed Discipline, Accept Correction**

The focus of today's proverb seems to be on how we are to be an example to others. If we heed discipline, we are showing others the way of life; if we ignore correction, it will lead others astray. As we saw in an earlier study, discipline is a sign of God's love. "The Lord disciplines those he loves" (Hebrews 12:6; see also Psalm 94:12). So, we are to accept discipline for its own sake, but also to be a good example to others.

In this study we will focus on the correcting effect of discipline; that is, how we are to accept criticism as discipline so as not to lead others astray. In actuality, few of us accept criticism graciously. We don't like being told that our thinking or acting is wrong. Viewed philosophically, criticism is nothing more than an observation by another person concerning our words or behavior, something that doesn't match our own point of view about ourselves. It's not that big a deal.

When we react to criticism, it is not a good example to others. Typically, we might try to defend ourselves or even counterattack with criticism of the other person. This not only burns up a lot of emotional energy but it can easily lead to the dissension we dealt with in our last study. And, of course, we learn nothing constructive from the criticism.

A much better example is to agree with the criticism. This doesn't mean allowing ourselves to be a doormat or having our self-esteem destroyed. We don't have to believe all the charges levied against us. Yet, simply agreeing with the criticism defuses the situation, allows the person the freedom of expressing a point of view, and provides an opportunity for us to learn something about ourselves. And, our noble act is a good example to others.

*R&D Recall an instance in which you were criticized. How did you react?*



Prayer: *Lord, help me to be a good example to others in all the challenges I face.*

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### Day 13

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**Read: Proverbs 10:27**

#### **Add Length to Your Life**

“Fear of the Lord” does not mean being afraid of God. It has to do with holding Him in due reverence and wanting to live according to His will. A person who lives in this manner adds length to his life. The opposite is the wicked person who fears death. Those who don’t believe in God usually fear death. They should; they have nothing to look forward to. So, how does all of this work, on a practical level?

A person who loves and follows the Lord has a quality of life very different from the one who does not. The desires of the sincere Christian are of a healthy and life-giving nature. The needs are relatively meager and easier to attain. The emotions are more stable. The lifestyle is simpler. These are the things that promote long life. But, even for the Christian who dies young, life will have been fuller and freer than the life of the wicked. The Christian moves on to a better place.

The life of the wicked, or someone who is just an unbeliever, is very different. It is filled with anxiety, confusion, and unsatisfied desires. It is also filled with sin. Now the Christian’s life will not be sin-free, but the Christian knows where to go for forgiveness; others do not. It is easy to see why the years of the wicked can be expected to be cut short. But, again, even for the wicked who reach old age, there is nothing good to which they can look forward. It is not a happy picture.

An exercise that might be helpful for us all is to imagine that we are at our own funeral. That gives us an opportunity to look back on our life to see where it has been and where it is going. It is a particularly good thing to do during Lent, when self-examination is what we are supposed to be doing. This can be a wake-up call toward any corrective needed.

*R&D How are you progressing this Lent with self-examination? What more do you need to be doing?*

Prayer: *Examine me, O Lord, and help me to know myself.*

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### Day 14

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**Read: Proverbs 11:2**

#### **With Humility Comes Wisdom**

C. S. Lewis said that pride is the essential vice, the utmost evil. Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride goes destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.” A footnote in the *Life Application Bible* says, “Proud people take little account of their weaknesses and do not anticipate stumbling blocks. They think they are above the frailties of common people. In this state of mind they are easily tripped up. Ironically, proud people seldom realize that pride is their problem, although everyone else around them is well aware of it. Ask someone you trust whether self-satisfaction has blinded you to warning signs. He or she may help you avoid a fall.”

The pride in us demands that others look at us and see how special we are. It’s the temptation to think that our accomplishments are more significant than the other person’s. We want to be seen, heard, respected, and praised, often at the expense of someone else. Whatever the other person say or does, we try to outdo it. To the extent that we engage in such things, we do so to our

own detriment. We squelch the joy of the person who is trying to share and drive a wedge between us.

As the opposite of pride, with humility comes wisdom. Humility isn't thinking poorly of ourselves, it is seeing ourselves realistically in relation to God. It is letting praise and admiration fall on others, and thoroughly enjoying it. It is being at peace because we don't need to have attention directed toward ourselves and, instead, allow others to receive the glory.

Humility seeks what is special about others. We look for the accomplishments in their lives and rejoice in them. When they tell a story, we listen attentively with no thought of upstaging them. We can honestly say, "That's wonderful; tell me more." When we let others share the glory we can be more relaxed and everyone can have a good time. This is the wisdom that comes from humility.

*R&D To what extent are you able to let others shine in the spotlight?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me not to disgrace myself with pride but to have the wisdom that comes from humility.*

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## Day 15

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**Read: Proverbs 11:3**

### **The Integrity of the Upright**

Our proverb tells us that our integrity guides us if we are upright but, if we are unfaithful, we are destroyed by our duplicity. Duplicity is double mindedness of thought or action. It is getting off the track; in our case, getting off the track God has for us to follow.

In a season of self-examination, it is fitting to ask ourselves, "Are we upright or uptight?" Growing in the spiritual life is like everything else. It requires practice, practice, and more practice. In fact, we become whatever we practice. If we tend to become uptight when things aren't going right—continually reacting to criticism by defending ourselves, insisting on being right all the time, or turning life into a drama dependent on ourselves, for instance—where is there integrity in that? We will be frustrated because what we have practiced is frustration rather than spiritual growth. The caution, then, is to be careful what we practice.

When we practice prayer, worship, Bible study, and the service of others, a very different picture emerges. It is a picture of the upright rather than the uptight. Here we can develop the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Because we become what we practice, here again we have an opportunity for self-examination. Where is our primary focus? How do we spend our time? Are we doing those things that will lead us toward our stated goals? Are we "walking the walk" or only talking the talk? Is our desire to serve God integrated with our actions? Remember: the integrity of the upright guides them.

*R&D Are you in practice for the goal the Lord has for you?*

*Prayer: Help me to stay focused on You, Lord, because the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.*

## Day 16

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**Read: Proverbs 11:13**

### **Don't Gossip**

There shouldn't need to be a proverb on this subject. Anyone, even a non-Christian, should know that it is wrong to gossip. It is also wrong to betray a confidence, and we are told that a trustworthy person keeps a secret. These seem to be such commonsense warnings that everyone would try to live by them. The fact is, however, despite our best intentions we still do not.

If you asked me if I gossip, I would not only deny it, I would be insulted that you even asked. Yet, I'm guilty. I'm so unhappy with some things that are going on in the world that I wanted to believe an email that ridiculed the other side's position even though what it said seemed patently untrue. Before checking the matter out, I repeated it. It was, of course, untrue. Then I couldn't remember to whom I had repeated it. What I had done was nothing more than common gossip.

Some people are just spiteful and gossip for the fun of it. They offset their own shortcomings by rejoicing in the misfortunes of others. They're not the ones I want to deal with in this study. They wouldn't pay any attention to it anyway. What I want to caution about is those of us who truly have such compassion for others that we tend to get more involved in their lives than may be healthy. The symptoms of this inclination surfaces when we find ourselves saying, "I wouldn't do that if I were her" or "I can't believe he did that." And, of course, we are sharing that thought with another person and it becomes gossip. Or we have been asked to pray for someone but to keep the matter confidential; instead, we rationalize that there was no reason to keep it confidential and the more people praying, the better. We betray a confidence in doing so.

When we are tempted to carry our compassion for others farther than it is appropriate to go, we need to tell ourselves, "Mind your own business."

*R&D Do you find that you have been sharing comments with others that should not have been shared? What will you do to curtail such actions in the future?*

*Prayer: Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; and keep watch over the door of my lips (Psalm 141:3).*

## Day 17

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**Read: Proverbs 11:24-25**

### **The Generous Will Prosper**

When looked at from the world's point of view, our reading for today seems folly instead of wisdom. How can a person gain by giving away? Yet, from God's point of view, this is exactly what happens. God blesses those who give freely of their time, talents, and treasures. Somehow, the more we give the more we seem to have. Furthermore, generous giving helps us realize what is really important and what is not. We gain the right perspective on money and possessions; they really belong to God and He is just letting us use them for a period of time. Because He is an all-loving God, He expects us to use what He has given us to show our love to others. And, the remarkable thing is that we experience freedom from enslavement by our possessions, the joy of helping others, and God's approval.

It is especially rewarding, as we have noted in an earlier study, to give anonymously. Another thing generous people do is to practice random acts of kindness. This is a giving of ourselves, though it can also include giving money or other possessions. There is no formula for doing this;

it is something for which we look within ourselves for the guidance on the Holy Spirit. It might be picking up the trash in our neighborhood, sending a contribution to a worthy cause, being a volunteer to feed the hungry, or helping to relieve someone's financial stress.

In our congregation a large percentage of our people are unemployed, underemployed, or in ministry. Thus, there is a built-in need for support within our body of Christ. Those of us who can afford to do so provide work for those who do not have enough. Anonymous gifts are made to those in special need. Low interest loans are made or vehicles given to those who need transportation. In these and many other ways, we have opportunities to reach out to our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

The more refreshing we do, the more we seem to be refreshed.

*R&D What has been your experience of generous giving?*

*Prayer: Lord, You give us so much; may we never be reluctant to share what we have with others.*

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## Day 18

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**Read: Proverbs 12:16**

### Overlook Insults

It is hard not to retaliate when someone insults or annoys us. However, doing so only makes matters worse. We solve nothing and we invite further trouble. A better idea is to respond slowly, prayerfully, and quietly. Proverbs 15:1 tells us "a gentle answer turns away wrath." It's difficult to argue with someone who turns us a soft reply to a charge we might have made against him. A rising voice and harsh words, on the other hand, invite an angry response. If we turn away from wrath and use gentle words, we can expect a much better outcome.

Here's an idea. Respond quietly the next time someone says to you something like, "You're crazy if you think we can accomplish what needs to be done by doing it your way." Take a deep breath and then say, "Tell me why you think that's true." Then practice being a good listener. We may remain convinced that our plan is the better one, but at least we have given the other person a chance to state his opinion. And, surprise!, it might be a good one.

Such an attitude might appear to some to be weak, but taking time to hear a contrary point of view is really a showing of strength of conviction. It is often the person who is unsure of himself who shows his annoyance at once. It takes energy to always be right. It takes no energy to allow the other person to express himself.

When all viewpoints have an opportunity to be laid upon the table, some good things can happen. We may learn something new. When everyone feels they have been listened to, there is more opportunity for appropriate compromise. There is more likely to be greater harmony and more of a commitment to move forward with whatever is decided. As Christians we are to love one another. That would seem to encompass ignoring an insult rather than showing immediate annoyance.

*R&D Recall a heated discussion you had. How could tempers have been cooled and a better result attained?*

*Prayer: Lord, give me a cooler head and a warmer heart.*

## Day 19

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**Read: Proverbs 12:18**

### Avoid Reckless Words

How many times have we said something, perhaps in the heat of argument, and wished immediately that we could take it back? Of course, there are also times when we have stated something clearly and positively, even though we know it may have been hurtful to the person to whom we were speaking, and felt good about having taken such a strong and forthright stand. But even in those situations, we may later wish we had been more gentle and understanding.

As Christians, we don't want to hurt people, and reckless words can be particularly hurtful. We have undoubtedly been the victim of them ourselves. In "the back roads of our memory" probably lurk painful words others have said to us, perhaps many years in the past. We don't want to implant such hurtful words in the minds of our loved ones, or anyone else for that matter. Finding ways to avoid reckless words is a wise practice for all of us.

One thing to consider is giving up our tendency to criticize others. If we are of a critical nature, that says more about ourselves than those we criticize. It says that, for some reason, we have a need to be critical. A little self-examination may show that we have a self-confidence problem and therefore don't want others to appear to be better, smarter, or whatever, than we think they really are. Yet, criticizing another is likely either to cause them to retreat in fear or shame, or to lash out in anger. Neither is a happy consequence.

Another thing we can do when we are on the verge of reckless words is to count to ten. Anything that will allow us to think before we speak is helpful in avoiding reckless words. Better still is taking the time for a brief prayer. Pausing (and praying) helps us get things in perspective. When we weigh what we were getting ready to say against the damage it is likely to cause, wisdom will lead us to silence or a gentle word that can bring healing.

*R&D When was the last time you had to "bite your tongue" to keep from saying a reckless word? Are you glad you did? Why or why not?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me always to speak the healing word rather than the reckless one.*

## Day 20

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**Read: Proverbs 12:25**

### The Anxious Heart

Our proverb tells us that an anxious heart weighs a person down. Jesus spoke eloquently to the point in Matthew 6:25-34. It is there that he tells us not to worry, and gives some specific examples of why we shouldn't. He says we are to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness, and then all we need will be given to us. He tells us not to worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself; each day has enough trouble of its own.

We know these things, and still we worry. A little worry is not necessarily a bad thing; it helps us stay on top of the situations and issues in life we need to deal with. The problem is the anxious heart that weighs us down. We will be much less effective in our Christian life and in our life in general if we are paralyzed by anxiety. And, letting our worries dominate us is evidence that we are not trusting God.

Let's look at biblical ways to deal with our anxieties and a practical way as well. The biblical approach involves immediately raising the question, when an anxiety attack hits us: What is God's will in this situation? Does He want me weighed down with worry, or is there something

I am to learn in this situation? If the attack comes in the middle of the night, God may want us praying about the matter rather than agonizing over it.

A practical approach (though certainly not an unbiblical one) is to be aware of how quickly our negative and insecure feelings can spiral out of control unless we nip them in the bud. Again, if the attack comes in the middle of the night—a time when we seem most vulnerable—we begin by thinking of something we need to do the following day. Instead of being grateful that we have remembered the matter, it tends to lead us to other things we will face in the day ahead, and we worry about them. The solution is to notice what is going on in our mind before these worries have a chance to build momentum. Keep a notepad next to your bed on which you can write down the thing that occurs to you in the middle of the night, be cheered by the fact that the Lord has called the matter to your attention, and then go back to sleep before other thoughts have a chance to creep in.

*R&D How do you deal with anxiety attacks? Will the thoughts in this study help you in the future? Why or why not?*

*Prayer: Lord, may I seek Your kingdom first, and rely on the fact that other things aren't really that important.*

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## Day 21

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**Read: Proverbs 13:3, 15:23**

### Guarding Life

In earlier studies we have dealt with the need to watch our words. We can too easily injure others by our accusations, reckless words, and argumentation, and we can do damage to ourselves as a result. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus cautions against angry retorts (Matthew 5:21-26), taking vows (Matthew 5:33-37), seeking revenge (Matthew 5:38-42), and judging others (Matthew 7:1-6) as examples of how we can take actions and say things that are harmful to others and ourselves, and contrary to the will of God. The wisdom of guarding our lips, however, is not limited to what we may say against others.

Let's look at three ways of guarding our life in relation to things we say. The first is from the point of view of self-control. A fulfilled life is one that is in control. That is, controlled by the Holy Spirit within us. If we are out of control, we are open to the wiles of Satan, confounded by confusion, and lacking in wisdom. We are outside the will of God. Not only are we unlikely to guard our lips concerning what we say about others, but about what we say in general. Our speech may be laced with obscenities, it may brag about our assumed accomplishments, or it may display our ignorance. We have not mastered our self-control if we cannot master what we say.

The second way in which we can guard our life by guarding our lips is to learn to listen. Too often our conversations become contests to out-talk one another. Instead of listening to what the other person has to say, we are busy thinking of what we want to say. This leads to missing the other person's point of view, overreacting, misinterpreting meanings, imputing false motives, and forming incorrect opinions before the other person has had a chance to finish speaking. We guard our life by learning from others.

Thirdly, referring to our second proverb for today, we find joy in making an apt reply. If we are in control of our talk and are good listeners, we are much more likely to respond in an appropriate manner. A timely word is a word of wisdom, grace, and healing. It guards our life.

R&D *How good a listener are you? What can you do to improve your listening skills?*

Prayer: *Lord, help my speech not to be about myself but for the blessings of others.*

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## Day 22

**Read: Proverbs 13:14**

### A Fountain of Life

Our proverb for today complements our last lesson and takes us a step farther. If we learn to listen to the “teaching of the wise” our lives can be turned from “the snares of death.” For the Christian, the teaching of the wise has to do with understanding Scripture, being informed and transformed by it. Accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior leads to salvation (turning us from the snares of death) and Bible study should be a major part of our sanctification process as we live into our salvation. There is no greater wisdom than the wisdom of Scripture.

But wisdom also comes from our interchange with others. We can’t be effective Christians without understanding the world around us. We can’t witness to Jesus Christ in our lives if we have no meaningful relations with others. Understanding the world around us and having meaningful relations with others involves a lot of listening to, and understanding, others. It also involves sensitive (Holy Spirit led) response to what others say. The wisdom we receive from God can be a fountain of life to others and turn them from the snares of death, but only as we understand them more fully.

If we “seek first to understand,” that indicates that we place the importance of understanding others over our desire to make them understand us. If we want quality, fulfilling communication with others, we need to give them priority. It is only as we understand other people’s point of view, what is important to them, and what they are trying to say, that we can be effective in communicating with them. Otherwise, we find ourselves answering questions that have not been asked. When people feel listened to, heard and understood, they become much more open to us. Then we are in a much better position to witness to Jesus Christ in word and in deed.

Effective communication allows us to both receive and give the teaching of the wise that is a fountain of life.

R&D *Relate a recent instance of receiving the teaching of the wise in your own life.*

Prayer: *Give me ears to hear, Lord, eyes to see and a heart to understand Your wisdom.*

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## Day 23

**Read: Proverbs 14:21**

### Be Kind to the Needy

Every Christians should know that despising our neighbor is sin. Jesus makes it clear that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus states the Summary of the Law: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love you neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40). Furthermore, when Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), he was making the point that our neighbor is anyone in need.

There is no question that Jesus had a heart for the needy. Certainly his focus was on the spiritually needy: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this

means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew 9:12-13). Those who were physically poor and downtrodden were also a priority for Jesus. In instance after instance, he reached out to the poor while upbraiding the wealthy and influential Pharisees and Sadducees.

The problem we human beings have is in feeling compassion for the needy (of various kinds) all around us. We’re just more comfortable with people who are sort of “like us.” People who behave differently from us, those of different cultures, even those of religious backgrounds other than our own, may well pose a problem for us. Perhaps, if we are honest, we really don’t like being around them, maybe even fear them. How can we reach out to them as the Samaritan did to the injured man along the roadside?

Richard Carlson recommends looking beyond the behavior or other characteristics of those around us who are different from us so that we can be kind to them in the way the Lord would have us be. He recommends looking for the innocence in the other person. By that he means seeing the other as a vulnerable human being who is loved by God just as much as we are. Carlson says, “Underneath even the most annoying behavior [or characteristics strange to us] is a frustrated person who is crying out for compassion.” Jesus wouldn’t have let that person’s “differentness” stand in his way of helping them, and neither should we.

*R&D With what category of people do you find it hardest to identify and, therefore, to help? Why?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to see, with the compassion of Jesus, all those in need around me.*

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## Day 24

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**Read: Proverbs 14:30**

### A Heart at Peace

We should all want to have a heart that is at peace. It certainly gives life to the body in the sense that we are much more likely to be healthy people if our heart is at peace. Unnecessary worry, envy, and other troubling traits wear our bodies down and make us more susceptible to physical injury and disease. A heart at peace gives health to our spiritual and emotional lives as well.

Envy will most certainly rot our spirits and our emotions as well as our bodies. Envy is evidence of our lack of trust in God. We think we are entitled to something that other people have, and we want it for ourselves. We are, in a sense, expressing our dissatisfaction with God because He has allowed other people to have or achieve things that are denied to us. Envy eats at our inner being. It is only when we can realize that everything belongs to God, and that we should be grateful for what we have, that we can begin to defeat the insidious disease of envy. We will know we have won this battle when we rejoice in what other people have rather than wishing it was ours.

Perfectionism is another thing that can keep our heart from being at peace. Peace of mind and heart are in conflict with perfectionism. When we are under a compulsion to always have things a certain way—better than they already are—we are engaged, almost by definition, in a losing battle. As with envy, rather than being grateful for what we have, we are focused on what’s wrong and why we need to fix it. We are in a constant state of dissatisfaction, discontent. Whether our discontent is related to what we are dealing with in our own lives or the “imperfections” in the lives of others, the very act of focusing on the imperfection severely hinders peace of mind and heart. God’s wisdom is to do our very best but not to be concentrating on what’s wrong with us



and everything and everybody around us. When we quit stressing on imperfections, we will be more open to God's perfect will.

R&D *What keeps you from having a heart at peace? What will you do about it?*

Prayer: *Lord, give me the peace that passes all understanding; a peace that can only be found in You.*

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## Day 25

**Read: Proverbs 15:4**

### A Healing Tongue

When we think of healing, we tend to think of situations wherein a person is physically ill or injured. "The tongue that heals" in those instances can be a tongue that prays for the person in need or the comforting words of a visitor to the person. But there are many other ways in which the tongue can heal, and certainly many ways in which a deceitful tongue can crush the spirit.

At any given time, more people are in need of emotional and spiritual healing than physical healing. Our opportunities to be instruments of the Lord's healing are virtually unlimited if we will take the time and effort (and prayer) to remember those who might need a healing word. Many people are lonely, and we can come into their world in a positive way by making a phone call or writing a letter. Although emailing is less personal, it is a simple way to reach out to many people. Through it, we can not only send a personal message but can forward something we have received that we believe would be an encouragement to them.

A Lenten practice that has been helpful to me is to contact someone each day, someone whose life has beneficially affected mine over the years. It is my way of saying "thank you" to them for all they have done. Perhaps you would like to start doing that this Lent, although it is mostly over, and then continuing in the days afterward. If you are like me, you will find there are more people you would like to contact than there are days to do it if you just do one a day. This is definitely a healing work.

But, let's not forget that other side of our proverb for today. A deceitful tongue crushes the spirit. We have already touched several times in this study on the problem of words inappropriately spoken. This proverb deals specifically with deceit. It is bad enough to speak critically, pompously, angrily, or too hastily; it is worse to speak deceitfully. To be deceitful is to lie, and is traitorous in nature when done to someone who trusts us. Instead, let's speak with a tongue that heals.

R&D *In what ways can you be an instrument of God's healing through your words?*

Prayer: *Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.*

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## Day 26

**Read: Proverbs 15:22**

### Making Good Plans

There is a famous prayer that goes, "Make me ever mindful of the needs of others." A wise friend switched the wording around and used to pray, "Lord, make me needful of the minds of others." That's what today's proverb is about. We are not exercising wisdom when we fail to seek advice from those who know more about the matter facing us than we do.

Sometimes we seem embarrassed to ask for guidance. We feel that, because of our age, experience, position, or whatever, we are supposed to know what to do. Asking someone's advice seems an admission of weakness. Such an attitude is simply evidence of pride and lacks wisdom. We proceed at our own peril.

Others of us have a sort of tunnel vision. We are locked into one way of thinking and don't want to be confused by the thoughts of others. We may well miss the best solution because our minds are closed to other ideas. Others—even if they don't have the experience or expertise that we do—can enlarge our vision and broaden our perspective. It is wise to seek all the help we can get when we are making plans. We can make a practice of getting to know those people who have sound minds and good advice. If we are open to their ideas and suggestions, we will be much more likely to succeed, whatever our endeavor.

These principles particularly apply to our spiritual life. Being a part of a Bible study or prayer group puts us in contact with others whom we can grow to trust with our hearts and minds in the most important part of our life. Just having a prayer partner or Christian friend who is spiritually mature can be a blessing in helping us deal with the issues we face. Why try to go it alone when we can benefit from the body of Christ, others who have been gifted by God to help us along the way?

*R&D On whom do you rely to advise and guide you? How does that work?*

*Prayer: Lord, make me ever needful of the minds of others.*

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## Day 27

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**Read: Proverbs 15:30**

### Good News

Joy is an inner quality in the life of the Christian. A fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), it is a work of the Holy Spirit within us. Our inner attitudes do not have to reflect the outer circumstances surrounding us. Joy is centered in our relationship with God. That is the anchor that holds us in place regardless of the situation we are in. If we truly know that our life is in Christ, and that what really matters at any given time is what he expects of us, we can have joy in the midst of the worst kind of trouble.

Our proverb for today tells us that the joy we have in our heart can bring joy to others. We can do it by a cheerful look. The people in the world around us—regardless of their culture, religious persuasion, or whatever else—can spot joy in another person when they see him or her. We have the opportunity to be ambassadors of Christ and conveyers of the Good News just by genuinely smiling at others. A woman once asked Mother Teresa this: "You have this fantastic worldwide ministry, and I am just a housewife in Peoria, Illinois; what can I do?" Mother Teresa told her, "Just smile a lot." A cheerful look brings joy to the hearts of those around us.

A few days ago we considered Jesus' command that we love our neighbors as ourselves, and we noted that Jesus meant, by our neighbors, anyone with whom we come into contact. A Christian friend takes this command so seriously that he tries, in all his contacts, to look at the other person as someone Jesus loves, and therefore someone to whom he should show love. He has found that this attitude opens doors for him to share with others what Jesus means in his life. As a result, he has been able to share the Gospel, the Good News, in leading people into a relationship with Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

It's amazing what a little smile can do. Sometimes it creates an epidemic of smiles.

R&D *Are you someone who easily smiles at others you see during the course of your day? Why or why not?*

Prayer: *Give me a joyful heart, O Lord, that I may show forth Your love to others.*

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## Day 28

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**Read: Proverbs 16:11**

### Honest Scales

Our word should be our bond. This is an expression that was widely used in former times to indicate that a written agreement was not necessary. What the persons said could stand as a contract between them because honesty was expected. In the Old Testament verbal agreements were binding on the parties because they placed their reputations behind them. When the first deacons were chosen in the early Christian Church, it was because they were respected men (Acts 6:3).

Whatever we do vocationally and otherwise in our lives, we know what is honest and what is not. Pressure is sometimes brought to bear on us to be dishonest, perhaps in some very small matter, in order to advance ourselves or gain a small profit. However, any such action is clearly against the will of God. He demands honesty in every transaction. There is, of course, the temptation to rationalize. "Everybody does it" is often at the source of such temptations. As Christians, we simply don't have that option. The Lord expects of us nothing less than honest scales and balances.

An attempt was recently made to get a relative of ours to conceal her considerable wealth so she could take advantage of the federal government's Medicaid program. She rejected the suggestion immediately because it was contrary to her Christian faith, but she was shocked to find that others who professed to be Christians were taking advantage of the government in this way.

"All the weights in the bag" are of God's making. He has set the standard, and we are to do His will. We should pray for discernment and wisdom to be consistently honest and fair in all our dealings.

R&D *When have you been tempted to do something that was not quite honest because "everyone is doing it"? What happened?*

Prayer: *Give me courage, Blessed Lord, to stand against dishonest practices in large things and small.*

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## Day 29

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**Read: Proverbs 16:23**

### A Wise Person's Heart

What are the qualities of a wise person's heart? Perhaps the foremost quality would be trust in God. From that would spring inner peace, strength, and quiet assurance. These qualities should be evident in the person's demeanor and actions. Think of the wisest person you have known and reflect on his or her qualities. Consider, further, the extent to which you have tried to duplicate those qualities in your own life. Now reflect on how you might instruct others in the way of wisdom (lips that promote instruction).

A wise person chooses his battles wisely. Life is filled with opportunities to make a big deal out of a matter or letting it go. Wisdom comes in knowing what is really important and what is not. If we choose to tackle those matters that really do matter while ignoring those that don't, we'll be much more successful in handling the important things and much more content with life in general.

We can look at life as one huge battlefield in which we face one impending disaster after another. This battlefield image can be overwhelming and depressing. Yes, it's true that a lot of unexpected and often unpleasant occurrences will be facing us every day. But, so what? Many of these things will be trivial in nature, and we should treat them as such. If we "sweat the small stuff" it blinds us from dealing effectively with the things that really need our attention.

It's better to look at life as a series of challenges that, with God's help, we can take on one step at a time. The challenges are the big stuff, things we can learn from and grow. And, as you deal with them, remember to tell yourself this: "God and I are an overwhelming majority."

*R&D Are you developing a wise person's heart? Explain.*

*Prayer: Help me to have the wisdom, Lord, to know what is worth tackling and what can better be left alone.*

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## Day 30

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**Read: Proverbs 17:17**

### A Loving Friend

"Friendship" and "love" are words that can be too easily tossed around today. Our proverb takes those words seriously. Loyalty and commitment are involved in truly loving friendship. There is a huge difference between knowing someone—even over many years—and being a true friend. The best test of genuine friendship is loyalty, what Paul defines (in 1 Corinthians 13:7) as always protecting, always trusting, always hoping, and always persevering. It's being there to help and support in times of distress and personal struggle.

Too much of what we call friendship is superficial. Fair-weather friends stick around when the relationship helps them, but disappear when they're not getting what they want out of it. In assessing true friendship, loyalty is the key. In our relativistic age that does not rely on ultimate truth and is too quick to compromise, loyalty takes a beating and commitment comes into disfavor. Loyalty is based on the commitment of one person to another. For a healthy society, loyalty is an essential ingredient.

According to a friend, "The loyalty between David and Jonathan was a covenant relationship based on brotherly love. 'Covenant' implies more than a simple agreement; in biblical times a covenant was considered a commitment in which God had a part. Christians are beneficiaries of the New Covenant through Christ's death on the cross for our redemption. Thus, there is a sense in which our loyalty to others is more than a casual commitment. Our ability to be loyal is because of the loyalty of the Son to the Father, as we live in the grace of Christ through the Holy Spirit."

A footnote in the *Life Application Bible* (at 1 Samuel 18:1-4) tells us that the foundation stones of the loyalty between David and Jonathan were: (1) they based their friendship on commitment to God, not just to each other; (2) they let nothing come between them, not even career or family problems; (3) they grew closer when their friendship was tested; and (4) they remained friends to the end.

R&D *Consider how many true friends you have, and...*

Prayer: *Thank God for them.*

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## Day 31

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**Read: Proverbs 17:22**

### A Cheerful Heart

Why would a cheerful heart be good medicine? A person with a cheerful heart is much more likely to be healthy than a person with a despondent heart. Cheerfulness is evidence of a positive attitude, and a positive attitude promotes good health. But it also promotes good health in others. The person with a smile of welcome, an encouraging word and enthusiasm for the task ahead breeds cheer in the hearts of others, and that's good medicine for all.

A good sense of humor is evidence of a cheerful heart. A person with a good sense of humor is looking at life from a balanced point of view. He doesn't take himself too seriously. He can laugh at himself, even use his own failures as fodder for jokes. Ideally, his humor is wholesome; it doesn't focus on the misfortunes of others, nor does it contain foul language and smutty illustrations. He sees those things as negative, unnecessary, and certainly not uplifting. He is self-effacing rather than cynical or sarcastic. He is someone we like to be around.

Not all of us have a good sense of humor by nature, however. So, how can we begin the day with a cheerful heart? Richard Carlson recommends taking time every day to think of someone to thank. He says it is one of the most important habits he has developed. He begins the day thinking of someone for whom he is grateful. When we dwell on someone for whom we are thankful, it builds gratitude in our hearts.

If we do this and have occasion to go ahead and extend our appreciation to the person we have in mind, that is certainly good medicine for that person. But, even if that is not feasible, beginning the day with an attitude of gratitude can make all the difference in our own lives. It helps us to have a cheerful heart, and that is likely to have a beneficial effect on those we come into contact with during the day. It's just good medicine.

R&D *To what extent do you believe you have a cheerful heart? If you don't believe you do, what will you do about it?*

Prayer: *Lord, the love of You gives me much to cheer about; help me not to contain my joy, but to spread it around like good medicine.*

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## Day 32

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**Read: Proverbs 17:24**

### Keeping Wisdom in View

There is nothing wrong with dreaming big dreams. The problem is keeping things in perspective while we do. We all know people whose dreams of the future have always been too big for them. Rather than undertaking a vocation they could handle, they have consistently shot for the "big bucks"—jobs they thought would provide the wealth they were entitled to—and they have continued to fail at all they sought to do. It is a fallacy to let our "eyes wander to the ends of the earth." Proverbs 12:11 tells us: "He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment."

Wisdom tells us to align our goals with God's will for our life, being the person He wants us to be. Keeping wisdom in view means being honest in our relationships, patient with ourselves and those around us, and loving toward all. From a worldly point of view, this may not seem to be an exciting way to live our lives, but it has eternal consequences. Lent is a good time to take inventory of our dreams and goals to see if they align with God's will or are selfish and unrealistic.

The other side of having unrealistic expectations in life is having a self-defeating attitude. God doesn't want that for us either. Richard Carlson says, "Become aware of your moods and don't allow yourself to be fooled by the low ones." When we are of sound disposition, we have things in perspective, and use wisdom and common sense. Bad moods, on the other hand, spiral our confidence in ourselves steadily downward. We feel defeated in what we undertake, take things personally that were not meant to be, and misinterpret the intentions of those around us.

The important thing to remember is that we all have mood swings. A day that gets off to a glorious start can become drudgery if our mood turns negative. In such instances we need to remind ourselves that, for some reason or other, a bad mood has overtaken us. We should simply pass it off for what it is...an unavoidable human condition that will go away in time if we just leave it alone. In such situations, I tell myself, "This too will pass." This keeps wisdom in view.

*R&D How have you dealt successfully with mood swings in your life?*

*Prayer: Lord, in the trials and temptations of everyday life, help me always to keep wisdom in view.*

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### Day 33

**Read: Proverbs 17:27-28**

#### **Being Even-tempered**

Let's look at today's reading from the standpoint of trying to understand the people around us. We will follow the wisdom of these verses if we can develop an attitude of being more accepting and less judgmental. Then we will be more even-tempered, will be more restrained in our words and even silent when it is better to say nothing at all.

If you'll allow me a personal illustration, I'll share something that has been helpful to me in this regard, although it occurred long before Jesus Christ became central in my life. At an impressionable age, I had occasion to read virtually all of the novels of the English writer Thomas Hardy. There were no real heroes in his novels. The character of the various people in his books was always well formed, but they all had serious weaknesses as a result of the culture in which they were raised, their circumstances in life, and other factors. Without realizing it at the time, I became more tolerant of the people around me because I had come to understand the basic differences in human beings as reflected in those books.

If we've ever traveled to a foreign country, we realize what a diverse world we live in. But, in a sense, we can see the same thing sitting on a bench at the mall or in a theme park. People come in all shapes and sizes, from varying cultural backgrounds, and assorted circumstances of life. If we find ourselves being tempted to judge another because of the way they dress or the things they say, a healthy reaction is: "That person's world is certainly different from mine, but it's her world." The point is that not only are people in different parts of the world different from us, but every individual everywhere is different from us.

If we can come to understand our world in this way, we will be less likely to say things we ought not say, and we will be more even-tempered. It's not a matter of simply tolerating differences

but understanding and honoring the fact that it couldn't be any other way. It is how we can make friends across cultural and other barriers and be reconcilers for Christ.

R&D *To what extent do you have trouble accepting people who are different from you? What might you do about that?*

Prayer: *Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in Your sight.*

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## Day 34

**Read: Proverbs 18:16**

### A Servant's Heart

“A gift opens the way for the giver.” There are many ways to give. Our focus today will be on the giving of ourselves. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1). We are to place ourselves on the altar of God for Him to use us in the world. And Jesus said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45). As Christ’s people in the world today, we are here to serve.

As we turn our lives over to the Lord first thing in the morning, we can also begin the day by asking ourselves how we can be of service during the day. If we are sincere in doing this, the Lord will remind us of all sorts of things we can do for others as the day moves along. The servant attitude spawns many opportunities to serve that otherwise we might never have realized were there.

Our opportunities to serve are endless. They can start with being attentive to our spouse, children, and co-workers and their special needs. It can mean giving our seat on the train or bus to an older person, allowing a driver to get into the lane of traffic in front of us, or other acts of common courtesy. It can be volunteering to do something someone else would otherwise have to do. It can be calling on someone who is lonely or in need. Making a contribution to a charity or other worthwhile endeavor is also an act of servanthood.

The giving of ourselves because of the love of God within us is not a one-time effort. We don't do what we are moved to do and then spend our time rejoicing in our own righteousness or wondering why others are not following our good example. Instead, having a servant's heart is a lifelong process, a godly way of looking at life. The blessing of this manner of life is expressed in the ancient saying, “Giving is its own reward.” That's just another way of saying, “A gift opens the way for the giver and ushers him into the presence of the great [God].”

R&D *To what extent would you say that you have a servant's heart? Explain.*

Prayer: *Lord, make me ever mindful of the needs of others.*

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## Day 35

**Read: Proverbs 19:2**

### Zeal without Knowledge

When Jesus cleared the Temple of the moneychangers (John 2:16-17), he did so with such zeal that his disciples remembered Psalm 69:9: “Zeal for your house will consume me.” So, zeal itself is not a bad thing. In the often apathetic and lethargic world in which we live today, a little more zeal would be welcome. The problem, as our reading for today warns us, is that it is not good

to have zeal without knowledge. Otherwise, we are likely to run around doing all the wrong things. “If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into the pit” (Matthew 15:14).

What this proverb is dealing with is our sometimes tendency to rush through life, hurling ourselves into the unknown because we haven’t taken the time and exercised the wisdom to figure out what is going on and how to deal with it. One of the biggest reasons for divorce in our day is the failure of couples to understand the nature of married life. Others experiment with drugs, the occult, and sex without considering the consequences. Still others plunge into their job without evaluating whether it is the proper line of work for themselves and stay busy, though miserable, without knowing what the problem is.

But even the ordinary, faithful Christian can exercise zeal without knowledge in our everyday lives. We stay so focused on what we believe we are supposed to be doing that there is no time for our loved ones or for enjoying life. We convince ourselves that our obsession with our “to do” list is only temporary. We’ll soon complete what we have to do and be free to be calm, relaxed and happy. Unfortunately, that rarely happens. As soon as we check several items off our list, more have appeared.

Again, it’s time for self-evaluation. Remember that no matter how important we think we are and how essential the things are on our list, nothing is as important as our relationship with God and with those with whom He allows us to share our lives.

*R&D Are you too zealous for the things on your “to do” list? What will you do about it?*

*Prayer: Quiet my soul, O God, and keep me focused on You.*

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## Day 36

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### Read: Proverbs 19:11

#### Wisdom Gives Patience

Patience is a good subject to consider immediately after our last proverb about becoming over-zealous. Patience implies waiting and enduring. Contrasted with the slogan “Just do it,” its motto is “Take your time.” It is in patience that we recognize God as the Lord of time who does not run behind schedule.

The two primary qualities needed in order to be patient are inner peace and living one day at a time. Inner peace comes from a stable relationship with God through prayer, Bible study, and worship. It helps us keep things in perspective, and focuses our attention on others and their needs rather than our selfish desires. Living one day at a time allows us to experience life at its fullest rather than fretting over things past or future.

A clergy friend has suggested these steps for dealing with impatience:

- (1) First, we need to *name* our own impatience.
- (2) Then, after identifying it, we need to ask ourselves some questions: (a) Why am I being impatient? (b) Do I trust God in this circumstance? (c) Is there a good reason God is asking me to wait? (d) Am I just being selfish?
- (3) Ask God, through His Holy Spirit, to reveal what is behind my impatience.
- (4) Finally, confess it. Impatience, like every other sin, requires both the Lord’s forgiveness and the inward work of the Holy Spirit to overcome it. We need to make this a matter of prayer, and then experience the transformation that only God can work in us.

If we can deal with our impatience, our proverb tells us that it is to our glory that we will be able to overlook an offense. We’ll be patient about it.



R&D *Are you, by nature, a patient or an impatient person? Or, are you patient about some things and impatient about others? How might you become more patient?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me first to be patient with myself, but, certainly, patient with others as well.*

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### Day 37

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**Read: Proverbs 19:19**

#### **The Danger of Enabling**

The first thing we must do with this proverb is to probe what it is really talking about. My contention is that it is dealing with an issue about which there is more wisdom today than in the past, the problem of enabling. Alcohol and drug addictions have, unfortunately, become major issues. But so have other instances of abuse and misbehavior. So, although the proverb mentions the hot-tempered person, it undoubtedly means to include a wide range of people who have obsessions and addictions. If we rescue such a person, it will not cure the problem and it will have to be dealt with over and over again.

As Christians, it is natural for us to want to help the person in trouble. We want to show him love. But, what is really needed is tough love. Tough love goes beyond what we might call “putting a band-aid on the cancer.” Surgery is needed. When we cover up a person’s obsession or addiction because we don’t want to embarrass him or the family, we are not showing love. We are simply enabling the continuation of the problem.

People with these kinds of problems don’t need to be rescued, they need to be healed. They are like children who have never learned discipline and responsibility. Until they do, they are doomed to continue repeating the unacceptable behavior for the rest of their lives—to their destruction, and danger to those whose lives are affected by them.

Fortunately, help is available for dealing with destructive behavior. Whatever it takes, be willing to show the tough love that is needed in the situation. If an intervention is necessary to get the person to face up to his problem, do it. Don’t be an enabler. If you simply rescue the person, you can be sure you will have to do it again.

R&D *What has been your experience in dealing with someone close to you who has an alcohol or drug problem?*

Prayer: *Give me the wisdom and courage, Lord, to show tough love when tough love is needed.*

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### Day 38

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**Read: Proverbs 22:1**

#### **Reputation**

If you asked the average person which they would rather have...a good reputation or vast wealth...I’m afraid a large percentage of them would say vast wealth. I wish I didn’t believe that, but I do. Many people are foolish enough to believe that great riches can buy them a reputation or whatever else they want, but it is not so. Seeking after silver and gold is a never-ending, always unsatisfying quest. The more people have, the more they want. Unhappiness is the fruit of their effort.

As Christians, our focus should not be on the accumulation of wealth. It should be on doing the will of God. It is true that God can lead us into a vocation that results in our attaining wealth,

but that is very different from seeking wealth for its own sake. There is nothing wrong with having money; it is the love of money that is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

A Christian's reputation, on the other hand, is a pearl of great price. If we want to be effective in this world as God's people, there is nothing we could more highly treasure than to be thought well of, to be trusted, and to be dependable; in other words, to have a good reputation. It is then that people will be open to Christ's love, through us. Thus, our reputation should be well guarded by our living in accordance with God's purpose for us. Others are always watching to see if our actions are in line with our professed beliefs.

Furthermore, we can be much more content within ourselves if we focus on what we can be grateful for (our reputation) rather than always wanting something we don't have (great riches). Reminding ourselves of the blessings God bestows on us is much more satisfying than yearning for things that are beyond our reach. If we can start thinking more about what we have than what we want, our life will improve. We'll find we have something much better than silver and gold.

*R&D Do you often think about your reputation? Why or why not?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to earn a good reputation so that I may be more useful to You.*

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### Day 39

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**Read: Proverbs 27:21**

#### A Crucial Test

Today we take a new and different look at silver and gold. In our last reading we considered them in the context of great riches; now we look at how they are refined. A crucible is a vessel that can withstand a high degree of heat so that, in it, a precious metal can be separated from the materials in which it is imbedded. Crucible is also another word for a severe test.

Our proverb tells us that praise tests a person in the same way metals are tested in the crucible. We've just considered in our last study why it is important to attain a good reputation. That is something quite different from seeking to attain praise. Praise can come to a person who has a good reputation, but it should never be praise that we seek. Primarily, we don't want to be swayed by the praise we receive. That is what the proverb means by being tested. A person of integrity sticks to his or her inner convictions and does not change positions based on praise received.

We have all seen many leaders, including—unfortunately—some Christian leaders, who have become so impressed by the praise they have received that they have lost perspective, and their integrity and reputation have been severely damaged as well.

We shouldn't leave this subject, however, without considering that some people are just as damaged by blame as they are by praise. Richard Carlson says, "Praise and blame are all the same is a fancy way of reminding yourself of the old cliché that you'll never be able to please all of the people all of the time." Although we shouldn't be swayed by praise, we can appreciate it. It is hard to be grateful for blame. We tend to resent disapproval. A candidate for public office can breeze to victory with 55% of the vote, but it means that 45% didn't want him. These are facts of life. The important thing is to stick to our principles regardless of praise or blame.

*R&D How do you deal with praise and blame?*

Prayer: *Lord, keep me on the course You have for me, not to be driven off target by the opinions of others.*

## Day 40

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**Read: Proverbs 28:26**

### **Walking in Wisdom**

Today's proverb is, in a way, a summary of what we have been considering throughout this series on "Practical Wisdom." Walking in wisdom is what keeps us safe; being wise in our own eyes is what gets us into trouble.

Many people see the rugged individualist as the example they want to follow. They idolize the courageous, self-made person who seems to know where he is going and is willing to tackle any obstacle that gets in the way. Such a person seems self-reliant, not needing the advice or help of others. The justification for holding this type of person in high esteem might be the saying, "God helps them that help themselves," thought by many to be in Scripture but actually from *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

God's way is a different way. No one can know the future or predict the consequences of his or her actions. Thus, the totally self-reliant person is doomed to failure. The wise person relies on God for guidance and direction. God helps those who seek Him (Matthew 6:33).

Over the days of this study, we have seen many things that God would have us do or not do, ways to express ourselves, and times to remain silent. Through the practical suggestions of Richard Carlson and others, we have encountered helpful ways to apply the teachings of God in the book of Proverbs. Through this Lent, perhaps we have seen some things in ourselves that need to be changed and have been challenged to do so. The wisdom that comes from God is the way of life.

R&D *In what specific ways has this study been helpful to you?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for the wisdom that You impart; help us to appropriate it to ourselves and to live it every day of our lives.*

*by Harry C. Griffith*

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