

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Proverbs 1:1,7, English Standard Version.

1 The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

*7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

Mark 6:4, English Standard Version.

4 And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household."

John 16:25-28, English Standard Version.

25 "I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. 26 In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; 27 for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. 28 I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father."

Words of sages.

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of short sayings that give advice on how to live a virtuous life. It is one of a collection of Old Testament Books that are collectively called the Books of Wisdom; they also include Psalms, the Book of Job, the Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. Although most Protestants don't include them in the Bible, Catholics and a few other denominations also include a Book that is itself called

Wisdom and the Book of Sirach, for a total of seven books of Wisdom. The Book of Proverbs is somewhat unique in that you can read just a couple of lines and get a complete thought. A “proverb” in biblical literature is any compressed, instructional statement that makes use of artistic language, rather than normal written or conversational language. The Book gets its name from the opening verse of the Book, which is: “The proverbs of Solomon.” But it’s not true that he wrote all of them, and in fact, we don’t know if he wrote any of them, as Proverbs contains seven different collections of wisdom statements and they clearly come from a wide variety of time periods, much of them from after the life of Solomon.

So, who wrote them? Over the course of the history of Israel, there arose three groups of religious leaders: priests, prophets, and wise men, also known as sages. It is this last group of people who wrote the Proverbs. The priests, by the way, issued laws, and the prophets spoke in the place of God. Scholars believe that the sages or wise men, the people who wrote the Proverbs, were a professional class in Israel, and that the Book of Proverbs was carefully collected from the writings of these people. The sages were highly educated and were respected for their practical insights into morality and psychology. They wrote, not for the common person, but for the elite, for folks who were well-off, educated, and highly placed socially. The sages promoted a form of happiness that was attainable

through obedience to ultra-high moral standards. Their goal was to use God's teachings as a way of training people to succeed in life, and not for the purpose of obtaining an eternal reward. It is believed that the roots of the sages go back to the very beginnings of Israelite society, and that their proverbs began as folklore and riddles used for amusement and erudite speaking by the highly educated. And while King Solomon might not have written the Proverbs, he probably patronized the Sages in a sort of royal school, and thus promoted and helped collect their work. There are scholars who do believe, however, that Solomon did write some of them, and that he actively collected many of the Proverbs that appear in the Book. Solomon himself was highly educated and quite wealthy, and so you could see him attracted to this elitist, abstract, literary form of learning.

I happen to like one Proverb that comes very early in the Book. It is our first reading: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.* We've talked about this word "fear" before, in the context of the Bible. Remember that fear in the Old Testament isn't the kind of fear we experience in daily life, like being afraid of a lion charging at us or of the results of a pending medical test; it is a fear born out of the awe of God. It is a pious fear. Fear of God means that we hand over our hearts and minds to a God who can do astonishing things. It is a fear produced by a deep respect. So, this Proverb says

that we first begin to attain knowledge when we put our full trust in God, but that foolish people despise wisdom because they have not put their trust in God. They would rather try to seek truth and learning on their own, rather than turn to God for leadership and guidance. The reason I like this Proverb so much is because it contradicts an assumption basic to our worldview in America today. People think that knowledge of the real world, knowledge derived by our own observation, or from scientists or other learned people, is far more valuable than what we can learn through faith. Our society tells us that God is not the source of tangible truths. But I, of course, believe that the fear of God, the act of turning to God in awe and with complete respect and trust, is the way to ground oneself in true, eternal knowledge, and that people who skip this process often make very foolish mistakes. I believe that everything we learn on this earth is radically more useful if it is rooted in faith. As a technology professional, I am particularly sensitive to people who find superficial security in digital devices and shun the deep mysteries of faith. They tend to depend on technology as an alternative to depending on their hearts to tell them what is true. They look to Google for answers, not God.

Let's move to our second reading, from the middle of the Gospel of Mark:
⁴And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household." Jesus is talking about how he

will be rejected, not by strangers, but by his own people. But Jesus is not referring to Jews as a whole. This is a much more personal statement. Consider what comes just before our passage: *And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.* These are Jesus' own family and friends and neighbors who are rejecting him. Our second reading is also a proverb: *"A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household."* Jesus often taught in proverbs. In this passage, he's telling us that we need to stand strong in our faith in God, and that the people who are closest to us are the ones who are the most likely to challenge our faith, to make us question who we are. Proverbs may have begun as a mental and spiritual exercise for people who had a lot of time to spare, time to contemplate abstractions, but Jesus understood that thousands of years of Israelite knowledge was woven into those proverbs. In this one, he's telling us to hold tightly to what we believe, despite whoever questions our faith.

Our third passage is from the end of the Gospel of John, where Jesus says that he has been teaching, in part, with proverbs. The context of this passage is

this: In the previous Chapter, 15, Jesus explains to his disciples that they will be hated because they are followers of Jesus. In Chapter 16, Jesus goes on to explain exactly how this will come about. Jesus' concern is that they not let hatred and rejection cause them to abandon their mission. He wants them strong – and so they have to know what they are going to face. In our passage, Jesus says *“I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. ²⁶ In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; ²⁷ for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. ²⁸ I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.”*

Jesus is saying that it's time for him to stop being artistic in his language. The end is near. They are going to be on their own to spread his Word. He's being blunt, making it clear that they understand one thing: they don't have to worry about their futures with God. This is because they have accepted Jesus for who he is. God the Father loves them and will welcome them into his arms. Jesus is also saying that by his death and resurrection, the Apostles will have clear, obvious, and literal knowledge that all that he has taught is true. They can be confident. They don't have to ask questions. Nothing will be a mystery anymore. Jesus is speaking

to us, too. We might learn a lot from proverbs, but they demand a lot of thought. They are abstract. On the other hand, our faith is not abstract. It is a simple, clean, and obvious thing. Some ideas demand straightforward language.

What I want to convey today is that God gave us powerful minds and very creative ways of learning. Human languages are extraordinarily complex and powerful. English, like Aramaic and Hebrew and Greek, gives us a way to articulate the myriad of confusing and threatening things we must confront in life. But in the end, there is actually something very simple that we can rely on. This is God, Jesus, our faith, and our knowledge that someday we, like Jesus, will go to be with God forever. There is a time to learn by abstraction, and there is a time to be blunt.

My father was very good at the second thing and not at all skilled at the first. He was a retired Marine whose father didn't get along with law enforcement. My father sold car tires and worked on cars. It was my mother who was the educated one. Our house was filled with French and English books – and all of them were hers. I don't know for a fact that my father could have read a book, to be honest, even though he spoke English, Spanish, and French. He also changed his name at least three times. My mother, however, was very elegant in her speech and her dress. She loved to read in what she considered her native language: French. The problem was that back then, there was no Amazon, no easy way for her to order

books written in French. Did I say that her name was Annette Claire DuBois? I was the only one of us three kids who knew any French, and sadly, my French is now very imperfect. It was my job, however, once a year, on my mother's birthday, to go to a French bookstore in L.A., called La Cite, and buy my mother a French novel. I would skim it, of course. She liked literary novels and I would get advice from the people who ran the store. I would look at a few of them and then pick one. My mother wanted words of sages, not cheap fiction. Everything went fine until one August 1, my mother's birthday, when I was in tenth grade. I made the mistake of not getting any advice, and as a result, of buying a book that was written in a French that was too literate for me. Let's just say that when my mother opened the book and began to read, her expression went from joy to suspicion to blind rage.

In case you don't know it, French is one of those languages with a number of tenses and an almost separate vocabulary that is used in literature and not in everyday speech. I had picked a book that, although it was written in sophisticated French, ironically, it was not abstract in its message. It wasn't what we would call a book of Proverbs. It did not present knowledge in an erudite, educated fashion, one fit for people with scholarly interests. The storyline and action was - shall we say - crude. I'll stop there. My mother never did forgive me for that book. For the rest of her life, she would periodically remind me of the book I bought her. Now,

here's what's funny: she knew it was an accident, that I was over my head French-wise. She was simply disappointed that she hadn't taught me educated French.

Here's my point. The purpose of the Proverbs was to teach Jews and then Christians, in an elegant and literary way, how to live wisely in a hedonistic world. That is how our world is today. Nothing has changed. Our world is crude. My mother was attracted to literary books in erudite French because they were so far removed from the world around her. They gave her a clean, separate, non-worldly way of spending a little of her time. Jesus perhaps felt the same way and so he taught in proverbs, parables and allegories. But he got to a point where he realized that he could no longer protect his disciples. He could no longer teach them in abstractions. He was about to leave them - and they would be in grave danger - and so, it was time to be simple, clear, and gritty. He had to tell them that the bottom line was that God loved them, God knew that they were faithful, and God would always be there for them. Nothing else was important. If they could just lock that away in their minds and proceed with their mission of bringing the teachings of Jesus to the world, they would be just fine. Even if they forgot some of the fancy words of the sages that they had learned, they could relax. I often get abstract in what I say up here. It's the academic in me. But I hope that I always bring home a basic and simple fact: we need to completely trust God. Amen.