

Learning Life from Proverbs 4

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Introduction.

- A. Ever since man first began to write, he has needed ways to structure the ideas that he puts into writing so that they make sense to the reader. In the US today, there are a number of writing structures that we commonly use. For example, most of the articles we read in the newspaper or on the Internet are written with what's called an inverted-pyramid structure. Basically, the article begins with a topic sentence that is the most important part of the article and then follows it with a number of details that decrease in importance.
- B. Another structure that we commonly see is the five-paragraph essay structure that many of us learned in school. It contains an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and then a concluding paragraph. Its topic sentence is usually the last sentence of the introduction. I use modified forms of this structure a lot.
- C. However, our writing structures are not the only possibilities. For example, a structure that commonly appears in the writing of the Bible is called a chiasm. "Chiasm" is a scary word, but its meaning is quite simple. In the Greek alphabet, the letter chi is shaped like an X, so a chiasm is just an X-shaped thing. Unlike our forms of structure, the topic sentence of the chiasm is right in the middle. It starts off with a broad statement that gradually narrows in on the point, and then repeats itself in a mirror image on the way back out, like an X.
- D. This sounds very obscure, but we need to understand chiasms to understand the Bible. Many times in Scripture, Biblical authors may seem to be talking about a bunch of unrelated points, but that's because we don't understand the structure they're using. Once we see, though, that they're using a chiastic structure, we can get their overall point. This is particularly common in the prophets and in books like Proverbs. Let's look at a Proverbs chiasm this morning, both to understand chiasms and to learn life from Proverbs 4.

I. Learning.

- A. We see the text of this chiasm in Proverbs 4:18-26. Even just reading it like this, I think we get a sense of the way the back half repeats the front half. Within that front half, we are first commanded to **NOTICE**. This appears in Proverbs 4:18-19. Solomon here is calling upon us to look at what happens to the just, vs. what happens to the wicked. On the one hand, the just have an easy time with their walk through life, and the longer they go on being just, the easier it becomes. On the other hand, the wicked have the opposite experience. The longer they go on being wicked, the more likely they are to trip on something they didn't see.
- B. This, in fact, is one of the main earthly benefits to following God. It's comparatively easy to know what God wants us to do, and when we do it, it keeps us out of all kinds of trouble. Sin has a way of trapping us with all sorts of unforeseen consequences, but when we do what God wants and stay on His paths, we don't get close enough to the consequences to GET trapped. If we think we know better than God does, though, and start wandering around off the path, soon those consequences have got us all tangled up. These things are plain to see. Who has the better life, the non-drinker or the drunk? Who's happier, the family man or the adulterer? We can tell from the people we know and our own experiences that it's wise to serve God.
- C. However, observation is not the only way to gain wisdom. We can also learn God's ways if we **LISTEN**. Solomon brings this up in Proverbs 4:20. This is not a culturally popular idea. Americans don't like to listen, at least not to spiritual wisdom, and especially not to spiritual wisdom from those they perceive as old fuddy-duddies who are past it. Honestly, that has a lot to do with why Americans do so much dumb stuff. We need to be wiser than that. We should be eager to listen to wisdom from God's word. There are all too many Christians out there who don't attend services every time the doors are open. They want to know how much they "have" to go to church. Brethren, that's missing the point. We shouldn't see the assembly as an obligation. We should see it as an opportunity. There are only four hours a week when we even have the chance to come here and listen to someone else teach us about God's word. What we learn here can and will transform our lives for the better throughout the whole rest of the week. Let's be eager to listen.
- D. Simply listening, though, isn't enough to give us all the wisdom we need either. We also need to **READ**. This is the point of the first part of Proverbs 4:21. I think it's wonderful, friends, that so many Christians here are investing more of their time in service. That's what God wants us to do. However, we can't be so eager to get out and do that we don't spend time with God's word. Otherwise, we're like the Jews that Paul mentions in Romans 10. We have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. That's a problem. If all we have is zeal without knowledge, we're like a gun with a bad sight. We're shooting bullets all over the place, but there's no guarantee that we're hitting what God wants us to hit. That's why we need to remember to balance our private work with private study, so that we will have both the desire and the knowledge to be effective.
- E. The last step in perfecting knowledge in our lives, though, is to **REMEMBER**. That's why we see the admonition of the second half of Proverbs 4:21. Friends, we can pay attention to others all we want, go to church all we want, even study all we want, but unless we take what we've learned and make it a part of

ourselves, it won't do us a bit of good. We have to want to retain it and work on retaining it. We can't let the time we spend with God's wisdom become like the time I spent studying for finals in law school. Every semester, I literally studied myself sick, but my objective wasn't to make it a part of me. It was to cram information in so I could get a good grade on the test. Now, six years later, guess how much of all the law I learned I still remember? We can't let that happen to God's law in us. We need to remember it in our hearts.

- F. If we notice, listen, read, and remember, Solomon promises us that we will have **LIFE** as a result. That's the message of Proverbs 4:22. Even beyond that, life is the point of this entire chiasm. In its immediate context, this probably only refers to a prosperous life on earth, but generally, we know that learning and internalizing God's word will bless us in this life and in the life to come. There's nothing else in heaven or on earth that will do this for us. Sin cannot grant us either earthly or eternal happiness. Human religions cannot provide us with the wisdom we need to avoid disaster. Only as we find wisdom in the word of God can we hope to live.

II. Doing.

- A. Of course, there's a reason why such attention to spiritual wisdom will gain us life. It's not because there's some innate quality to hiding the word of God in our hearts. It's because as we know and embrace God's truth, we'll inevitably put that truth into practice, and it will change the way we behave forever. These changes in behavior are the focus of the back half of this chiasm. As we go through this section, let's pay attention to the way that the things that gained wisdom in the first part now act wisely in the second.
- B. Just as we remembered God's word in our hearts earlier, now the text is going to give us a mirror image. We are to **KEEP OUR HEARTS** pure from sin. This point is raised in Proverbs 4:23. In much the same way as we are to make sure that the word of God dwells within us, we're to make sure that wicked things DON'T dwell within us. The importance of this cannot be overstated. It's impossible for us to sin involuntarily. Every wicked thing we do, we choose to do, and that means that sin cannot spring up in our lives unless it has taken root in our hearts first. The thief covets before he steals. The wrathful man nurtures his anger before he speaks. The flip side of that, though, is that if we keep our hearts pure, Satan can't find a weakness. We preserve this purity of heart by doing just what Solomon says: constantly monitoring our thoughts, dwelling upon the good, and shutting the evil out of our minds. That way, our springs will not be polluted by evil.
- C. Another crucial step on the road to life is learning to **CONTROL OUR MOUTHS**. A few Scriptures back, Solomon highlighted the importance of listening to others. Now he's going to tell us how important it is to listen to ourselves. Look at Proverbs 4:24. This text tells us first of all that we cannot be deceivers. This is a very easy temptation to fall into. I doubt there's a man on earth who hasn't lied. However, simply because lying is common doesn't make it any less destructive or evil. The lies that we tell may serve to protect us for a little while. However, our lies will always end up injuring the one to whom we are lying. If they believe us, they'll be harmed by acting on information that isn't true. If they don't believe us, then it's our relationship with them that is harmed. Similarly, we can't be people of perverse speech. Scripturally speaking, this is any kind of crooked, worthless, unproductive speech. Rather than encouraging others and leading them toward God, it tears them down and points them toward the devil. Anything from a sarcastic insult to a dirty joke falls under the umbrella of perverse speech. It is never fit for the lips of a disciple of Jesus Christ.
- D. The next mirror image in the chiasm tells us to **FIX OUR EYES** on the goal of righteousness. This is the point made in Proverbs 4:25. We saw the eyes earlier being used to study and learn from the word. Here, they are looking ahead to where the word directs us to go, to the heavenly reward that cannot be seen without the eyes of faith. Of course, the devil doesn't want us to look at that goal. He's constantly waving other goals around in our peripheral vision, hoping to distract us with the things of earth from seeking the things of heaven. If he succeeds, the result will be spiritual disaster for us. I guarantee you, friends, there will be lots of people in hell who didn't intend to go there, but nobody is going to end up in heaven by accident. The only way to be forever with the Lord is to spend all our days here looking ahead to Him, to where He has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. That means that we have to give up on a lot of other goals. We won't have as much money as those who make accumulating wealth the reason for their existence. We won't have as much leisure time as people who love nothing more than going to a football game or sitting down in front of the TV. We won't see the same success in our careers as those who are willing to sacrifice everything for that goal. What we will have, though, is the reward that only comes to those who fix their eyes on God.
- E. The final part of this chiasm of life is found in the instruction to **WATCH OUR PATH**. This last part is, once again, a mirror image of the idea that we started off with. There, we were watching others, considering what happened to those who walked the path of the just vs. the path of the wicked. Here, we're being exhorted to walk the path of the just ourselves. Consider Proverbs 4:26-27. It's great to have the goal of going to heaven. It's great to fix our eyes on Jesus. That won't do us any good, though, if we point our eyes in one direction and let our feet go in another. There are all too many Christians who fall into this trap. They say, quite sincerely, that God is the most important thing in their lives, but they can't prove it by what they actually do with those lives. We need to be better than that. We need to watch our feet and keep them on the path.

Conclusion. If you haven't been seeking and following the teaching that will lead you to life, start today.