**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**PROVERBS-001. A YOUNG MAN'S BEST COUNSELLOR by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel; 2. To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; 3. To receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity; 4. To give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion, 5. A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels: 6. To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings. 7. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction. 8. My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother: 9. For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck. 10. My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not. 11. If they say, Come with us, let us lay wait for blood, let us lurk privily for the innocent without cause: 12. Let us swallow them up alive as the grave; and whole, as those that go down into the pit: 13. We shall find all precious substance, we shall fill our houses with spoil: 14. Cast in thy lot among us; let us all have one purse: 15. My son, walk not thou in the way with them; refrain thy foot from their path: 16. For their feet run to evil, and make haste to shed blood. 17. (Surely in vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird:) 18. And they lay wait for their own blood; they lurk privily for their own lives. 19. So are the ways of every one that is greedy of gain; which taketh away the life of the owners thereof."*

*Proverbs 1:1-19*

This passage contains the general introduction to the book of Proverbs. It falls into three parts--a statement of the purpose of the book (vs. 1-6); a summary of its foundation principles, and of the teachings to which men ought to listen (vs. 7-9); and an antithetic statement of the voices to which they should be deaf (vs. 10-19).

**I.** The aim of the book is stated to be twofold--to enable men, especially the young, to know wisdom, and to help them to discern the words of understanding; that is, to familiarise, by the study of the book, with the characteristics of wise teachings, so that there may be no mistaking seducing words of folly for these. These two aims are expanded in the remaining verses, the latter of them being resumed in verse 6, while the former occupies the other verses.

We note how emphatically the field in which this wisdom is to be exercised is declared to be the moral conduct of life. Righteousness and judgment and equity are wise dealing, and the end of true wisdom is to practise these. The wider horizon of modern science and speculation includes much in the notion of wisdom which has no bearing on conduct. But the intellectual progress (and conceit) of to-day will be none the worse for the reminder that a man may take in knowledge till he is ignorant, and that, however enriched with science and philosophy, if he does not practise righteousness, he is a fool.

We note also the special destination of the book--for the young. Youth, by reason of hot blood and inexperience, needs such portable medicines as are packed in these proverbs, many of them the condensation into a vivid sentence of world-wide truths. There are few better guides for a young man than this book of homely sagacity, which is wisdom about the world without being tainted by the bad sort of worldly wisdom. But unfortunately those who need it most relish it least, and we have for the most part to rediscover its truths for ourselves by our own, often bitter, experience.

We note, further, the clear statement of the way by which incipient wisdom will grow, and of the certainty of its growth if it is real. It is the wise man who will increase in learning, the man of understanding who attains unto sound counsels. The treasures are thrown away on him who has no heart for them. You may lavish wisdom on the fool, and it will run off him like water off a rock, fertilising nothing, and stopping outside him.

The Bible would not have met all our needs, nor gone with us into all regions of our experience, if it had not had this book of shrewd, practical common-sense. Christianity is the perfection of common sense. Godliness hath promise of the life which now is. The wisdom of the serpent, which Jesus enjoins, has none of the serpent's venom in it. It is no sign of spirituality of mind to be above such mundane considerations as this book urges. If we hold our heads too high to look to our road and our feet, we are sure to fall into a pit.

**II.** Verses 7-9 may be regarded as a summary statement of the principle on which the whole book is based, and of the duty which it enjoins. The principle is that true wisdom is based on religion, and the duty is to listen to parental instruction. My son, is the address of a teacher to his disciples, rather than of a father to his child. The characteristic Old Testament designation of religion as the fear of Jehovah corresponds to the Old Testament revelation of Him as the Holy One,--that is, as Him who is infinitely separated from creatural being and limitations. Therefore is He to be had in reverence of all who would be about Him; that fear of reverential awe in which no slavish dread mingles, and which is perfectly consistent with aspiration, trust, and love. The Old Testament reveals Him as separate from men; the New Testament reveals Him as united to men in the divine man, Christ Jesus. Therefore its keynote is the designation of religion as the love of God; but that name is no contradiction of the earlier, but the completion of it.

That fear is the beginning or basis of wisdom, because wisdom is conceived of as God's gift, and the surest way to get it is to ask of God (Jas. 1:5). Religion is, further, the foundation of wisdom, inasmuch as irreligion is the supreme folly of creatures so dependent on God, and so hungering after Him in the depths of their being, as we are. In whatever directions a godless man may be wise, in the most important matter of all, his relations to God, he is unwise, and the epitaph for all such is Thou fool!

Further, religion is the fountain of wisdom, in the sense of the word in which this book uses it, since it opens out into principles of action, motives, and communicated powers, which lead to right apprehension and willing discharge of the duties of life. Godless men may be scientists, philosophers, encyclopaedias of knowledge, but for want of religion, they blunder in the direction of their lives, and lack wisdom enough to keep them from wrecking the ship on the rocks.

The Israelitish parent was enjoined to teach his or her children the law of the Lord. Here the children are enjoined to listen to the instruction. Reverence for traditional wisdom was characteristic of that state of society, and since a divine revelation stood at the beginning of the nation's history, it was not unreasonable to look back for light. Nowadays, a belief's being our fathers is with many a reason for not making it ours. But perhaps that is no more rational than the blind adherence to the old with which this emancipated generation reproaches its predecessors. Possibly there are some old lamps better than the new ones now hawked about the streets by so many loud-voiced vendors. The youth of this day have much need of the exhortation to listen to the instruction (by which is meant, not only teaching by word, but discipline by act) of their fathers, and to the gentler voice of the mother telling of law in accents of love. These precepts obeyed will be fairer ornaments than jewelled necklaces and wreathed chaplets.

**III.** On one side of the young man are those who would point him to the fear of Jehovah; on the other are seducing whispers, tempting him to sin. That is the position in which we all stand. It is not enough to listen to the nobler voice. We have resolutely to stop our ears to the baser, which is often the louder. Facile yielding to the cunning inducements which strew every path, and especially that of the young, is fatal. If we cannot say No to the base, we shall not say Yes to the noble voice. To be weak is generally to be wicked; for in this world the tempters are more numerous, and to sense and flesh, more potent than those who invite to good.

The example selected of such enticers is not of the kind that most of us are in danger from. But the sort of inducements held out are in all cases substantially the same. Precious substance of one sort or another is dangled before dazzled eyes; jovial companionship draws young hearts. The right or wrong of the thing is not mentioned, and even murder and robbery are presented as rather pleasant excitement, and worth doing for the sake of what is got thereby. Are the desirable consequences so sure? Is there no chance of being caught red-handed, and stoned then and there, as a murderer? The tempters are discreetly silent about that possibility, as all tempters are. Sin always deceives, and its baits artfully hide the hook; but the cruel barb is there, below the gay silk and coloured dressing, and it--not the false appearance of food which lured the fish--is what sticks in the bleeding mouth.

The teacher goes on, in verses 15 to 19, to supply the truth which the tempters tried to ignore. He does so in three weighty sentences, which strip the tinsel off the temptation, and show its real ugliness. The flowery way to which they coax is a way of evil; that should be enough to settle the question. The first thing to ask about any course is not whether it is agreeable or disagreeable, but Is it right or wrong? Verse 17 is ambiguous, but probably the net means the tempters speech in verses 11 to 14, and the bird is the young man supposed to be addressed. The sense will then be, Surely you are not foolish enough to fly right into the meshes, and to go with your eyes open into so transparent sin!

Verse 18 points to the grim possibility already referred to, that the would-be murderers will be caught and executed. But its lesson is wider than that one case, and declares the great solemn truth that all sin is suicide. Who ever breaks God's law slays himself.

What is true about covetousness, as verse 19 tells, is true about all kinds of sin--that it takes away the life of those who yield to it, even though it may also fill their purses, or in other ways may gratify their desires. Surely it is folly to pursue a course which, however it may succeed in its immediate aims, brings real death, by separation from God, along with it. He is not a very wise man who ties his gold round him when the ship founders. He is not parted from his treasure certainly, but it helps to sink him. We may get what we want by sinning, but we get also what we did not want or reckon on--that is, eternal death. This their way is their folly. Yet, strange to tell, their posterity approve their sayings, and follow their doings.