Introduction to Proverbs

What is a proverb?
• A short, pithy statement of wisdom; especially an insight into human character and behavior—like the following common (non-biblical) sayings:
  ▪ “People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.”
  ▪ “Marry in haste; repent at leisure.”
• A short saying that provides a general truth (Ezek. 16:44—“Like mother, like daughter!”)
• A lesson drawn from experience (Ps. 78:2-6 refers to telling children about the Lord’s past faithfulness to Israel and calls it a proverb or a parable.)
• An object lesson using a comparison or an analogy (Prov. 25:11—“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” [NKJV]).

The book of Proverbs is Hebrew poetry, characterized by parallelism, which survives in translation!
• Synonymous parallelism—second line restates the first in parallel, but different words.
  ▪ “A fool’s lips bring strife,  
    And his mouth calls for blows” (Prov. 18:6).
  ▪ “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth;  
    A stranger, and not your own lips” (Prov. 27:2).
• Antithetical parallelism—second line contrasts with the first (the most common type of parallelism in Proverbs).
  ▪ “The plans of the righteous are just,  
    but the advice of the wicked is deceitful” (Prov. 12:5).
  ▪ “The memory of the righteous is blessed,  
    But the name of the wicked will rot” (Prov. 10:7).
• Emblematic (or comparative) parallelism—one line gives a figurative illustration of the other line.
  ▪ “As a ring of gold in a swine’s snout,  
    So is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion” (Prov. 11:22).
  ▪ “As the door turns on its hinges,  
    So does the sluggard on his bed” (Prov. 26:14).
  ▪ “Like clouds and wind without rain  
    Is a man who boasts of his gifts falsely” (Prov. 25:14).
• Synthetic parallelism—the second line amplifies the first in some way (such as completing the thought or expanding on it).
  ▪ “The first to plead his case seems just,  
    Until another comes and examines him” (Prov. 18:17).
  ▪ “Listen to your father who begot you,  
    And do not despise your mother when she is old” (Prov. 23:22).

Another technique typical of Hebrew poetry is the acrostic.
• Each section begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet (cf. Psalm 119).
• The Virtuous Woman passage (Prov. 31:10-31) is an acrostic.
Overview of Proverbs

I. Introduction to Wisdom; Contrast of Wisdom and Folly (chs. 1-9)
   A. Purpose of Proverbs is to give wisdom (1:1-7).
   B. Folly may interrupt this purpose (1:8-33).
   C. Seeking wisdom is beneficial (2:1–4:27).
   D. Folly may prevent one from seeking wisdom (5:1–6:19).
   E. Finding wisdom has advantages (6:20–9:12).
   F. Folly may prevent one from finding wisdom (9:13-18).

II. Collection of Solomon’s Proverbs (chs. 10-24)
   • Examples for us: Ask “Is this wisdom or folly?”
   • Chs. 10-11—Contrasts between wicked and righteous
   • Chs. 12-15—The contrasts become more subtle.
   • Chs. 16:1–22:16—Positive, encouraging instructions
   • Chs. 22:17–24:34—Many of the DO NOT proverbs

III. More of Solomon’s Writings, Edited by Men of Hezekiah’s Time (chs. 25-29)
   • Many of the comparative (or emblematic) proverbs here (using “like” or “as”).
   • Getting along with or knowing how to handle rulers, neighbors, enemies, fools, sluggards, gossips, etc.
   • What people are like and how to handle them

IV. The Words of Agur (including the numerical proverbs, ch. 30)

V. The Words of Lemuel (31:1-9)

VI. The Virtuous Woman (31:10-31)—An Acrostic Poem

Note: Some of the material in this handout comes from Alan P. Ross, Proverbs. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, edited by Frank E. Gæbelein vol. 5. Zondervan, 1991. Logos Bible Software. Some of it comes from notes of Karen Y. Davis, our former teaching leader.