

BIBLICAL STUDIES
RIGHTEOUSNESS IN PROVERBS

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Thank you, Dr. Lillback, Dr. Edgar, and members of the Gospel and Culture Project, for inviting me to deliver the inaugural “endowed lecture on Biblical and Systematic Theology and their impact on culture in the global context of Christianity.” This opportunity is a special privilege because the lectureship honors Professor Richard Gaffin. It is proper and good that we honor those whom God has honored.

Since I have written recently a commentary on the book of Proverbs, perhaps I can be most helpful by restricting my topic to the potential impact of Proverbs on culture. The key word in this connection is the book’s term “righteousness.” The title of this lecture is “Righteousness in Proverbs.”

T. S. Eliot asked: “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”¹ In Eliot’s worldview, wisdom implies an endeavor to inter-relate differing levels of reality. His worldview is counter-cultural, for Western culture is technological—that it is to say, it endeavors by the process of analysis to obtain knowledge and information about the constituent parts of different levels of reality. This process of analyzing, argues Eliot, is destructive to wisdom. In contrast to the process of analysis, he contends that synthesis works in the opposite direction. In contrast to our technological society’s aim to analyze the different levels of reality, wisdom seeks to inter-relate them. Our technological culture hopes by scientific knowledge to control the different levels of reality and so achieve salvation. By contrast, says Eliot, wisdom by the process of synthesis builds up a bigger picture to be admired. The consequences of seeking to control by analysis instead of integrating the levels of reality have been catastrophic, as our environmental crisis demonstrates. Wisdom can be described by the color “green,” as environmentalists use this metaphorical color.

Wisdom in Proverbs and its correlative term “righteousness” is all about being rightly related to God, to other human beings, to all creatures, and to the environment. The wisdom and knowledge that our technological culture has

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¹ T. S. Eliot, “The Rock,” 1934.

lost and that T. S. Eliot was looking for is found in the book of Proverbs. In this lecture I hope to contribute to coloring our culture green.

The principal text in Proverbs that informs my lecture is the preamble to the book.

- 1: ¹ The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:
² To know [literally, to know in experience] wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight;
³ to receive instruction in prudence,
in righteousness, justice, and equity [literally, uprightness];
⁴ to give prudence to the non-committed [traditionally, simple],
knowledge and discretion to the youth—
⁵ let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance—
⁶ to understand proverbs and parables,
the sayings of the wise and their riddles.
⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
wisdom and instruction fools despise.

The preamble asserts that King Solomon aims through this book to instruct the covenant youth, both the wise and the as-yet uncommitted, “to know wisdom” (v. 2) and to give them the prerequisite knowledge to make them wise (v. 4). More specifically, I argue in this lecture that the book’s wisdom and knowledge pertain to pursuing right relatedness. Before proceeding with the argument, however, by way of introduction, let me summarize some of the spiritual values of pursuing righteousness according to the book of Proverbs:

1. To profit self: “Whoever pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity, and honor” (21:21).
2. To promote a relationship with God: “*I AM* detests the way of the wicked but he loves those who pursue righteousness” (15:9).
3. To exalt the community: “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin condemns any person” (14:34).

In this lecture I specifically aim to define the concept and the term “righteousness” in the book of Proverbs. The inspired sages’ conception of righteousness is socially transformative; it transforms the City of Man into the City of God, from a culture that is metaphorically red, dripping with blood, to a culture that is green with life. Toward the conclusion of the lecture, after arguing the case, I venture to coin a proverb that encapsulates the sages’ conception of righteousness. The proverb aims to make the concept of righteousness in Proverbs memorable, one that can be carried into every social situation. To justify the conceptualization and the proverb I will develop the argument as follows:

- I. The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs: What is the source of wisdom? And what does wisdom mean? How does the creation reveal God’s wisdom?
- II. Wisdom of Solomon and Law of Moses: How does the wisdom of Solomon compare or contrast with the law of Moses? Do the proverbs of Solomon teach the same thing as the Mosaic law or do their teachings differ?

- III. Wisdom and Righteousness: Are wisdom and righteousness related? Is a person who is wise necessarily righteous? Can a person be wise and wicked, or be a fool and righteous?
- IV. The Concept of Righteousness in Proverbs: What exactly does “righteousness” mean in Proverbs? Does King Solomon use righteousness in the same way as the Apostle Paul?

I will develop the lecture as an artist might paint Edward MacDowell’s famous musical composition, “To a Wild Rose.” First, I will paint the background of the sky to give the wild rose its proper interpretative context, and then the landscape of a mountain to give it further context. Third, I’ll paint the woodland that is more immediately in the foreground of our subject, and finally, having contextualized the wild rose, I’ll paint our subject and highlight it. In this analogue, the sky represents the conception of “wisdom” in Proverbs with regard to its source and its meaning. This conception is necessary, for the literary context of righteousness in Proverbs is “to know wisdom.” That context provides a necessary background for interpreting righteousness in this book. The mountain landscape represents the second point: the contrast between the wisdom of Solomon and the Mosaic law given on Mount Sinai. This contrast, hopefully, will further clarify the meaning of righteousness in Proverbs. The foreground woodland represents the third point: a demonstration that wisdom and righteousness are correlative terms. This reflection is necessary to show that wisdom and righteousness are inseparable notions. Finally, the rose refers to the culturally transformative concept of righteousness in Proverbs, and my proverb highlights that notion.

I. *Wisdom: The Literary Context of Righteousness*

Let us begin, then, by painting the sky: the conception of wisdom (Heb. *hokmā*). The preamble asserts that the book aims to give Israel’s youth wisdom: “The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel, to know [literally, to know in experience] wisdom.” To be sure, the preamble identifies Solomon as the human author, but other texts show that Israel’s God, *Yāhweh* in the Hebrew language (in God’s own mouth his sentence name in English means, *I AM WHO I AM*), revealed this wisdom to Solomon and inspired his proverbs that convey this wisdom. If you will, let three texts suffice to validate the claim that God revealed to Solomon this wisdom and inspired him to set it forth in proverbs.

“God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight . . . [and so] Solomon spoke three thousand proverbs” (1 Kgs 4:29-32). “For *I AM* gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Prov 2:6). Solomon’s wisdom, personified as a heavenly mediatrix,² says of herself: “*I AM* brought me forth as the first of his works before his deeds of old” (Prov 8:22).

Wisdom must begin with the ultimate reality, *I AM*, to assure the comprehensive embrace of wisdom and the right relationship of all levels of reality. Without *I*

² Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 83-87.

AM's comprehensive knowledge, the finite mortal cannot attain to certain knowledge about what is good and bad by rightly relating all aspects of reality. Without revelation and inspiration, the finite mortal has only evaluations, not certain values. That is why Solomon personifies his wisdom as being with God before and when he created anything: "Then I [Woman Wisdom/Solomon's wisdom] was constantly at *I AM*'s side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in humankind" (Prov 8:30-31). In sum and in short, without revelation from the Eternal the finite mind cannot attain to infinite knowledge, the prerequisite of certain knowledge and wisdom.

Having identified the ultimate and immediate sources of wisdom, let us continue to paint the sky by asking, What does "wisdom" mean? In brief, "wisdom" (*ḥokmā*) means "masterful understanding," "expertise," "skill."³ The NIV helpfully renders on occasion *ḥokmā* by "skill." The term is used in the Bible for all sorts of skills. Outside of Proverbs *ḥokmā* is used, for example, of technical and artistic skill (Exod 28:3; 31:6), of the arts of magic (Exod 7:11; Isa 3:3), of government (Eccl 4:13; Jer 50:35), and of diplomacy (1 Kgs 5:7 [HB 5:21]). Let me illustrate only artistic and technical skill from Exod 28:3.

In this text God directs Moses: "Tell all the skilled workers [Heb. *ḥakmē lēb*, woodenly, 'wise of heart'] to whom I have given wisdom [Heb. *ruah ḥokmā*, woodenly, 'spirit of wisdom'] in such matters that they are to make garments for Aaron, for his consecration, so he may serve me as priest." These skilled workers cut down the flax in the field, boiled the fibers of the stalks to soften them, spread them out on their flat roofs to dry in the hot sun, heckled the fibers to separate them, spun them together to make thread, wove the threads on a loom into broadcloth, and cut and sewed the broadcloth to fit Aaron's body. Moreover, they dipped some fabric into dyes of blue and purple and scarlet to adorn the garment. Perhaps a metallurgist had the skill to make Aaron's headpiece, the gold miter that read "Holy to *I AM*." By clothing Aaron in these rich garments, these skilled artists and technicians set him apart as a sacred person of *I AM*.

In Proverbs, *ḥokmā* is used once of the survival skills of wee-creatures (30:24-28), but otherwise it refers to social skill: how to build a healthy society under God's rule and not a lethal one. In other words, "wisdom" in Proverbs refers to shaping a God-honoring culture under God's blessing, not one that stands under his curse. For example, many of the proverbs pertain to communication skills upon which all social relationships depend. The other dominant theme of Proverbs is on how to be money wise, namely, to use money to create a community of friends and not to alienate people from one another. As we shall see, righteousness in Proverbs is closely related to wisdom—that is to say, social skill.

Permit me for a moment to reflect as a systematic theologian. Orthodox theologians agree that God alone is eternal and has no associates. Now, since wisdom is a social concept pertaining to right relationships, for *I AM* to be eternally wise, he must be a unity of distinct personalities. Wisdom, which means

³ Ibid., 76.

social skill, must be exercised toward another person. Logic demands that for God eternally to exercise wisdom, God must be a unified plurality of persons in order to exercise and experience social skill.

Let me now reflect as an exegetical theologian upon *I AM*'s wisdom as displayed in the creation. "By *I AM*'s knowledge the clouds let drop the dew" (Prov 3:22b). So consider raindrops. If raindrops were circular and not spheroids, falling from the height of the clouds, gravity would bring them down with such force that the rain would strip the foliage off all plants and trees in the same forceful way as water under pressure from a hose strips it. As spheroids, however, without an even distribution of weight, the drops of rain spin and keep splitting apart as they pick up speed in their descent to the earth and so become ever lighter and finally fall gently upon the fragile foliage. Such is the social skill of *I AM*.

Or consider apple trees. They reproduce enough food to feed many creatures and enough seed to feed an expanding population. For example, in summer a bear eats about eighty pounds of apples per day. The fruit trees and seed bearing plants do not simply reproduce themselves; they bear enough seed and vegetation to feed everybody when wisely managed. This too is exemplary of the wisdom, the social skill, of *I AM*.

II. *Wisdom of Solomon and the Law of Moses*

Let us now continue to prepare our canvas by painting the mountain landscape, namely, by contrasting Solomon's wisdom with the law given on Mount Sinai. Solomon, who authored the bulk of the book of Proverbs, found his knowledge of the law insufficient for his responsibility as the supreme and final judge of God's people. His role as king was similar to that of the chief justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. But unlike the American chief justice, who is *primus inter pares* (first among equals), Solomon was the supreme judge over all other judges. To fulfill his role as sole chief justice of the kingdom of God, which was founded to establish righteousness and justice on earth, he indirectly confesses that the Mosaic law was insufficient.

Upon ascension to the throne, Israel's kings had to copy by hand the book of the law mediated by Moses. (The book of the law comprises approximately all but fifty-six verses of the book of Deuteronomy.)⁴ Moreover, the king was to read the book of the law daily. Moses ordained:

When he [the king] takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere *I AM* his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel. (Deut 17:18-20)

⁴ Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Thematic and Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 57.

Moreover, King David on his death bed charged his son Solomon to keep the law of Moses:

When the time drew near for David to die, he gave a charge to Solomon his son. "I am about to go the way of all the earth," he said. "So be strong, show yourself a man, and observe what *I AM* your God requires: Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements, as written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go, and that *I AM* may keep his promise to me: 'If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.'" (1 Kgs 2:1-4)

Tragically, however, Solomon failed to read the law daily, and for this reason the once wisest of men died a fool. He hangs himself on his own gibbet: "Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from words of knowledge" (Prov 19:27).

Nevertheless, Moses' instruction that the king copy the book of the law and David's death-bed charge to Solomon to keep it infer that Solomon knew the book of the law. The inference finds support in the theological unity between the book of the law and Solomon's proverbs.

As we shall see, Solomon's proverbs refine the law of Moses. The book of the law, even without Solomon's refinement, on its own has had a profound influence for good to benefit cultures that have lived by faith according to its teachings. Indeed, that book has had greater consequences for human history than any other single book. Its continuing influence is one of the major forces shaping cultures. Its regulations are the first to establish universal education and health care for all members of a nation and to fix the only welfare system that was in existence in ancient times. It first formulates the greatest command of all Scripture: to love God (cf. Matt 22:34-40). It also establishes a constitutional monarchy, a king subject to God's law.⁵

In spite of the great importance and profound influence of the book of the law, Solomon found that, in his role as supreme judge of the elect nation, he needed more discretion and wisdom than the book of the law provided. Shortly after his coronation he went to the high place at Gibeon, where after offering thousands of sacrifices to atone for his sin and to seek God's favor, he asked for a greater wisdom than he found in the Mosaic law:

The king went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices, for that was the most important high place, and Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. At Gibeon *I AM* appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." Solomon answered, "You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day. Now, *I AM* my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am inexperienced [Heb. *na'ar*] and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have

⁵ Ibid., 479.

chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both riches and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life." (1 Kgs 3:4-14)

With that gift of a wise and discerning heart Solomon coined his proverbs:

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. . . . And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. (1 Kgs 4:29-34)

Solomon's proverbs take up those social and cultural issues that are too fine to be caught in the mesh of the law, too small to be hit by the broadsides of the prophets. The refinement of the law of Moses by Solomon's proverbs may be compared to learning to drive a car. A driver first learns the comprehensive rule: "Drive carefully." But that abstract rule needs definition such as those provided by the road signs, such as "Stop," "Yield," "Speed limit, 35 mph," and the signals of traffic lights. Before being granted a driver's license the applicant must demonstrate his ability to follow these signs. But even knowing and following these more specific posted regulations do not qualify a driver to be granted a driver's license. Many states require the applicant for a driver's license to pass a written test before granting the license. To pass this test the applicant must know, for example, to park at least fifteen feet from a fire hydrant, to park at least fifteen feet from the corner of an intersection, to turn into the inside lane of a four-lane highway and to ease one's way over into the outside lane through the use of mirrors, and so forth.

In this illustration the general rule to drive carefully is like the comprehensive commandments "to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength," and "to love your neighbor as yourself." But those abstract commands need further definition. What road signs are to the driver, the Ten Commandments are to the covenant people. To love your neighbor means more specifically, "not to murder," "not to commit adultery," "not to steal," and "not to bear false witness." But as essential as these commandments are, Solomon found them insufficient for taking to the road of life; they need further refinement. The comprehensive rule, love your neighbor as yourself, more specifically defined as "do not murder," and so forth, are refined in the sages' hands by their proverbs.

The command "not to murder," in the Proverbs becomes to feed your enemy: "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink" (25:21). The command "not to commit adultery" is refined to

the husband's gesture to stand up in his noble wife's presence to give her honor and to praise her with public verbal praise: "Her husband [arises] and he praises her: 'Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all. . . . Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate'" (31:28-31). "You shall not steal" becomes in Proverbs to be generous: "A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor" (22:29). And the command "not to bear false witness" is sharpened by Proverbs, specified by "hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers over all wrongs" (10:12). The original translators of Proverbs for the NIV rendered the second half of that proverb by, "love draws a veil over all transgressions." In other words, the command not to bear false witness in the hands of the sage becomes: "Protect your neighbor's reputation by drawing a veil over his or her wrongs; do not put them on the stage and then draw the curtain apart for all to see their faults."

If the book of the law in the past has had a greater impact for good on Western culture than any other book, how much more would be the impact of its refinement in the book of Proverbs? Furthermore, when these small details are learned and practiced, the Ten Commandments will be actualized.

The logic here is similar to that of "the broken window theory." That theory is based on an article entitled "Broken Windows" by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, which appeared in the March 1982 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*. The book's title comes from the following example:

Consider a building with a few broken windows. If the windows are not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to break a few more windows. Eventually, they may even break into the building, and if it's unoccupied, perhaps become squatters or light fires inside.

Or consider a sidewalk. Some litter accumulates. Soon, more litter accumulates. Eventually, people even start leaving bags of trash from take-out restaurants there or breaking into cars.

A successful strategy for preventing vandalism, say the theory's authors, is to fix the problems when they are small. Repair the broken windows within a short time, say, a day or a week, and the tendency is that vandals are much less likely to break more windows or do further damage. Clean up the sidewalk every day, and the tendency is for litter not to accumulate (or for the rate of littering to be much less). Problems do not escalate, and thus respectable residents do not flee a neighborhood.

When Mayor Rudolph Giuliani applied the broken window theory to New York City, he significantly reduced crime in that great metropolis. So likewise when youth learn to feed their enemies, to honor those to whom honor is due, to be generous to the poor, and to protect another's reputation, the larger matters, such as those of the Ten Commandments, not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal, and not to bear false witness, will become a reality and society will become a place where people love one another as themselves. That sort of culture establishes the City of God and *I AM's* blessings crown it.

III. *Wisdom and Righteousness as Correlative Terms*

Having painted the sky (the literary context of knowing social skills) and the mountain landscape (the proverbs of Solomon intensify the commands in Moses' book of the law), let us now paint the immediate woodland foreground to give our wild rose more context. Here we reflect upon the notion that wisdom and righteousness are correlative terms.

Correlative terms are like synonyms in that they refer to the same person, object, or situation. Unlike synonyms, however, correlative terms belong to different worlds of thought, different fields of meaning—what linguists call “semantic domains.” As an example of synonyms, consider “wisdom” and “prudence.” They are synonyms because both terms pertain to the same person and/or situation and both belong to the semantic domain of intelligence. But “wisdom” and “righteousness,” though they pertain to the same person and/or situation, belong to different fields of meaning. Whereas wisdom pertains to the semantic domain of intelligence, righteousness pertains to the semantic domain of ethics. In Proverbs the same person and/or situation belongs inescapably to both fields of thought: of spiritual intelligence and of right behavior.

We can illustrate a correlative term by considering Dick Cheney. Dick Cheney is vice-president of the United States and president of the United States Senate. These are distinct roles, but they pertain to the same person and are inseparable. In relation to the president of the United States, Dick Cheney is his vice-president and in an emergency stands in his stead. In relation to the Senate, however, he governs that body. Nevertheless, these offices, though distinct, are inseparable. If he is vice-president of the United States, he is president of the Senate, and vice-versa. Similarly, wisdom and righteousness denote different notions, but they are inseparable. If a person is wise, he or she is righteous; if righteous, they are wise.

“Wisdom” in Proverbs needs the correlative term “righteousness” because “wisdom” without qualification is a morally neutral term. The serpent was wise but a devil (Gen 3:1). The Bible uses the term wisdom (Heb. *hokmâ*) of sorcery and of black magic. Consider, for example, its use in Exod 7:11-12: “Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs.” Outside Proverbs it is possible to be wise and wicked, but not in the book of Proverbs.

The preamble of the book of Proverbs carefully protects the morally vulnerable term “wisdom” and its synonyms by employing a chiasmic structure that features the correlative term “righteousness.” A chiasmic structure (also called a chiasmic pattern or ring structure) is a literary structure in which concepts or ideas are placed in a reversing symmetric order or pattern. For example, suppose that the first topic in a text is labeled A, the second topic is labeled B, and the third topic is labeled C. If the topics in the text appear in the order ABC X CBA so that

the first concept that comes up is also the last, the second topic is the second to last, and so on, the text is said to have a chiasmic structure. In this pattern, X, the pivot, has a special emphasis. A chiasmic structure may be likened to throwing a rock into a pond. Where the rock strikes is X and from that center the topics ripple outward in opposite directions. This structure can be discerned in the preamble.

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

² To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight;

³ to receive instruction in prudence: righteousness, justice, equity;

⁴ to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to youth;

... .

⁶ to understand proverbs and parables, the sayings of the wise and their riddles.

⁷ The fear of *I_{AM}* is the beginning of knowledge; wisdom and instruction fools despise.

Note how v. 2a: “to know [Heb. *da‘at*] wisdom and instruction” matches v. 7: “The fear of *I_{AM}* is the beginning of knowledge; wisdom and instruction fools despise.” Though the syntax of the preamble’s framing verses (2a, 7) differs, they repeat the same words in the same sequence, namely, know/knowledge [Heb. *da‘at*], wisdom, and instruction. In the B pairing verses, v. 2b matches v. 6: “to understand words of insight” and “to understand a proverb and parable; the sayings of the wise and their riddles.” In the C pairing, “prudent behavior” in v. 3a matches its synonym “prudence” in v. 4a. This concentric pattern highlights the pivot: “doing what is right, and just and fair.” In other words, within this A B C C B A structure, X, righteousness, is where the rock hits, and from it ripple out the other notions pertaining to the semantic domain of wisdom.

Here is a schematic sketch of the preamble’s chiasmic structure:

A. Comprehensive, intellectual values:	2a
To know [<i>da‘at</i>] wisdom and instruction	
B. Literary Expression of Wisdom	2b
to understand words of insight,	
C. Instrumental virtue: prudent behavior	3a
X. Moral, communal virtues:	
righteousness, justice, equity	3b
C'. Instrumental virtue: prudence , discretion, guidance	4-5
B'. Literary expressions of wisdom	6
to understand proverbs and parables	
A'. Comprehensive, intellectual virtues:	7
knowledge [<i>da‘at</i>]; wisdom and instruction	

In addition to this revealing pattern that unites inseparably wisdom and righteousness, elsewhere in the book of Proverbs and other wisdom literature, wise/wisdom and righteous/righteousness constantly interplay with one another, and so do their antonyms, fool/foolly and wicked/wickedness. For example, consider the first unit of proverbs in the first collection of proverbs entitled, “The proverbs of Solomon” (10:1a):

A **wise son** brings joy to his father, but a **foolish son** grief to his mother.
 Treasures of *wickedness* are of no value, but *righteousness* delivers from death.
I AM does not let the *righteous* go hungry but he thwarts the craving of the *wicked*.

.....

A **wise son** gathers crops in summer, but a disgraceful son sleeps during harvest.
 (10:1b-5)

In sum, if a person is wise he or she is righteous; if wicked, they are fools. Skillful living is invariably doing what is right.

IV. *Righteousness*

Having given our wild rose (i.e., righteousness) its interpretative contexts of the sky (a definition of wisdom as social skill), and of its mountain landscape (the refinement of the Mosaic law by Solomon’s proverbs), and of the woodland foreground (wisdom and righteousness are inseparable terms), we now paint the wild rose (the concept of righteousness in the book of Proverbs).

The Hebrew lexeme (that is to say, its lexical form) *šādaq* is universally glossed as “to be righteous.” Some scholars, such as E. Kutzsch (1881),⁶ define righteousness as subjection or obedience to a norm, to a standard.⁷ If *šādaq* means conformity to a norm, in the Bible that norm is God’s holiness. His holiness finds expression in part in the Bible’s teachings, such as the law of Moses, the proverbs of Solomon, and the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ in his Sermon on the Mount. Other lexicographers, however, such as H. Cremer (1899)⁸ and E. Achtemeier,⁹ define “righteousness” as socially acceptable behavior. According to the former notion—that is to say, that righteousness means to submit oneself to the norm of the Bible’s teachings—the term righteousness belongs in the semantic domain of jurisprudence, of law. According to the latter conceptualization of right social behavior, it pertains to the semantic domain of sociology, of human relationships.

After studying in the book of Proverbs every use of the terms involving the lexeme *šādaq*, I drew the conclusion that the conceptualization of righteousness should be subsumed under the umbrella concept of doing what is right in a social relationship as defined by God’s standard of what is right behavior. J. W. Olley similarly defined righteousness: “to bring about right and harmony for all, for individuals, related in the community and to the physical and spiritual realms. It finds its basis in God’s rule of the world.”¹⁰

I also drew the conclusion that according to Proverbs this socially acceptable behavior of doing what is right in social relationships as defined in the Bible’s

⁶ E. Kautzsch, *Abhandlung über die Derivate des Stammes šdq im alttestamentlichen Sprachgebrauch* (Tübingen: L. F. Fues, 1881), 53.

⁷ H. H. Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1969).

⁸ H. Cremer, *Die paulinische Rechtfertigungslehre im Zusammenhang ihrer geschichtlichen Voraussetzungen* (2d ed.; Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1900).

⁹ E. Achtemeier, “Righteousness in the Old Testament,” *IDB* 4:81.

¹⁰ See J. W. Olley, “‘Righteous’ and Wealthy? The Description of *Šaddiq* in Wisdom Literature,” *Colloq* 22 (1990): 38-45.

teachings entails depriving self to benefit others. As Solomon expressed it: “The righteous give without sparing [literally, ‘without holding back’]” (21:6b). This qualification of the book’s aim to know wisdom entails feeding the enemy and the poor, protecting another’s reputation, and so forth. Righteousness in the book of Proverbs is equivalent to the Mosaic teaching to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18), for the one who loves self looks to be fed by capable and willing people when hungry and to be protected when slandered.

Having defined the concept of righteousness in Proverbs as expending oneself to serve one’s neighbor, let me highlight the definition by coining a proverb:

**The wicked advantage themselves by disadvantaging others,
but the righteous disadvantage themselves to advantage others.**

Most English speakers, I suspect, when they think of wickedness, think in terms of the Ten Commandments. For most wickedness refers to murder, adultery, stealing, and lying. But in Proverbs wickedness pertains to the finer points: of not feeding the poor when you have the power to do so, of not honoring the honorable, of not stopping gossip in its track, and so forth.

This proverb to disadvantage self to advantage others puts wisdom in shoe-leather. As is the case with proverbial sayings, it can be carried into many social situations. In the classroom, it means that when a professor assigns a book that is no longer in print, the student does not rush to the library to take the book out to earn an A and so deprive the rest of the class of that advantage. To selfishly possess the book is wickedness. Rather, the wise and righteous student makes sure that classmates have access to the book, even as he or she would desire in their same situation. This wisdom-in-shoe-leather can be applied to the highway. One does not cut into a line of cars to save one’s own time at the expense of the time of the cut-off drivers. The proverb can be carried into a public rest room. The wise and righteous person leaves the facility clean for the next person.

This definition of proverbs also resolves troublesome sayings such as: “Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time?” (Ecc 7:16-17). Let me explain this troublesome saying by a personal anecdote. When I lived in the snowy winters of Philadelphia, my proverb of disadvantaging myself to advantage others prompted me, after I had shoveled my own sidewalk, to shovel the sidewalk of my neighbors: a widow next door in her nineties and a couple across the street also over ninety years of age. But after shoveling their sidewalks, as well as mine, I also had to consider the neighboring widower, also in his nineties. I had already spent four hours shoveling sidewalks, when it occurred to me, “Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself?” There is a limit to which one can disadvantage oneself to advantage others.

V. Conclusion

The church will put the proverb, “The wicked advantage themselves by disadvantaging others, but the righteous disadvantage themselves to advantage others,” within her commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the supreme

example of righteousness as conceptualized in Proverbs. He became poor that we might become rich; he gave up his life that we might have eternal life. Moreover, the church's catechism teaches that our Lord gave his church his Spirit to empower her to live his sort of life. Her best resolutions to live righteously will fail. Apart from God's grace, her best social efforts are splendid vices, for they are all tarnished by self-interests. Let the church look to the Triune God from whom every good and perfect gift comes, including the gift to give one's life to serve others.