

# TRUTH, GOODNESS & BEAUTY (1)

*A Look at How Proverbs Teaches Biblical Truth*

Before delving into the book of Proverbs proper, I'd like us to consider *how* its authors (usually Solomon) passed on wisdom and insight to their sons. And it's important to clarify that wisdom in Proverbs cannot be reduced to learning a set of propositions. Wisdom is not merely about regurgitating the correct answers on the final exam; rather wisdom manifests itself in a life of righteousness, justice, and equity (Pro. 1:3). *What* we teach is critical, our doctrine must be orthodox; however, here we want to focus on *how* biblical truth is communicated to sons (and of course this would apply to daughters as well, but Proverbs specifically addresses sons).

When it comes to teaching children fundamental doctrine the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, for example, is excellent. The question and answer format is great for indoctrination, as the following story from the life of Dwight L. Moody illustrates. "Moody, the famous nineteenth century evangelist, was preaching once to a crowded meeting of children in Edinburgh, Scotland. To get their attention he posed a question: 'What is prayer?'—expecting to answer the question himself. But to his amazement scores of little hands went up all over the hall. So Moody asked one young fellow to give his answer. The boy spoke out with clear and confident tones, 'Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgment of His mercies.' Moody's amazed response was, 'Thank God, my boy that you were born in Scotland!'" (John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, p. 211). This is the kind of results that catechizing can produce.

However, with fear and trepidation, if I can be just a little critical of the WSC, despite its obvious strength for providing solid answers to biblical questions (which I have used with my own kids), it is terribly dry at points. I wasn't surprised when I learned that it was written by a mathematician, I have nothing against mathematicians mind you, but it can read like the Pythagorean Theorem at times. The bare bones of doctrine also needs flesh and blood if it is going to be living and active, so as to transform lives. Remember, the desired end of all theology is transformation, not just information. Henry David Thoreau said, "A fact stated barely is dry. It must be the vehicle of some humanity in order to interest us. It is like giving a man a stone when he asks you for bread." In a similar vein, Richard Hugo wrote, "I caution against communication because once language exists only to convey information it is dying."

I went to a pastor's conference once where the speaker said from the outset that he wasn't going to use any illustrations or applications, he was just going to "give us the Word." I interpreted his words as, "This is going to be a dull, lifeless lecture. Grab a pillow." Actually, it wasn't too bad, but it would have been far better if he had included illustrations and applications. I'm not advocating for what C. H. Spurgeon called skyscraper sermons, where the speaker gives you nothing but one story on top of another. That's the opposite extreme—spine-less sermons. The balance is rock solid biblical teaching presented in a vivid fashion, so that it informs the mind, provokes the imagination, stirs the emotions, and moves the will toward greater holiness.

It's relatively easy to teach our children to discern between truth and error, as well as between good and bad. Even new converts know that pride, anger, lust, greed and envy are bad. Yet, how many Christians at any age view pride, anger, lust, greed and envy as ugly and disgusting, so that they have a visceral reaction that causes them to instinctively veer away from these repulsive sins? How many Christians "worship the LORD in the *beauty* of holiness? (Ps. 29:2, KJV). Truth, goodness *and beauty* are essential to godly living.

We Christians have done a fairly good job of emphasizing *truth* and *goodness*, but we have failed to captivate the next generation with the *beauty* of the Christian life, which helps to bridge the gap between information and application. "Walter Brueggeman speaks for all of us when he says, 'I have found myself discovering that mostly I do not need more advice, but strength. I do not need new information, but the courage, freedom and authorization to act on what I already have in the gospel... The deep places in our lives—places of resistance and embrace—are not ultimately reached by instruction. Those places of resistance and embrace are reached only by stories, by images, metaphors and phrases that line out the world differently, apart from our fear and hurt'" (quoted in Warren W. Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination*, p. 64).

# TRUTH, GOODNESS & BEAUTY (2)

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Is Brueggeman correct in saying that stories, images, metaphors and phrases can reach the deep places of resistance and embrace in our lives in a way that information by itself can't? I believe he is, and that is precisely the thesis of this introduction, and it is one of the great indirect lessons about teaching that we learn from the book of Proverbs. Proverbs provides us with a window to peer through, as we observe how godly parents instruct their children in the Scriptures, so that they, Lord-willing, will walk in paths of righteousness and integrity. And what we see taking place is not catechizing, but a more graphic and lively kind of instruction. Consider a couple of examples by way of comparison.

Exodus 20:12, the fifth commandment says, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you." God's Word often teaches nonnegotiable, propositional truths, so it obviously isn't wrong for us to teach this way either, nevertheless the vast majority of the Bible doesn't present us with bare "Thou shalt not" declarations, but narratives. Now notice how Proverbs teaches the fifth commandment: "The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by vultures" (Pro. 30:17). Would you not agree that this image reaches the deep places of resistance in a way that the fifth commandment alone doesn't?

Consider another comparison. The seventh commandment says, "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14). Will just teaching our children to memorize this commandment guarantee marital bliss and fidelity? If it were only that simple, right? In addition to this commandment, we should also (again, notice that it's not either/or but both/and) tell our sons, "Lust not after her beauty in thine heart; neither let her take thee with her eyelids. For by means of a whorish woman a man is brought to a piece of bread: and the adulteress will hunt for the precious life. Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Can one go upon hot coals, and his feet not be burned?" (Pro. 6:25-28, KJV). A friend of mine was in a store by himself on one occasion, and he was tempted to browse through some pornographic magazines that caught his attention—that is, until God brought this Proverb to mind, and he thought to himself, "If I give in to this temptation I'll be toast!" By the grace of God he walked away unscathed. Proverbs provides this kind of right-brain imaginative instruction that our children need for holiness.

Never underestimate the power of your child's imagination. David Mills is correct, "We tend to rely, I think, too much on knowledge. Even if Johnny has memorized the *Baltimore Catechism* or the *Westminster Confession*, or even hundreds of verses of Scripture, if his imagination has been formed by the wider, secular culture, he will respond to temptations as a secularist, not as a Christian.

"He will *know* that fornication is wrong and that intercourse is a gift reserved for marriage, but will *feel* that it is a recreational activity to be enjoyed with a willing partner by someone of sufficient maturity to use 'protection'—though the Christian teaching may affect him enough that he feels it requires some degree of 'commitment.' When he brings himself to temptation, his feelings are more likely to move him than his thoughts, and of course once he falls, his thoughts will start to fit his feelings" (David Mills, *Enchanting Children in Touch-stone*, Dec. 2006, p. 20-21). This is why our children's imaginations must be shaped by good stories—the only alternative of course is bad stories. But stories are not just a matter of good entertainment verses bad entertainment. Children will interpret the world around them through the grid that stories provide, and in addition to this they will behave like the characters in the stories that they identify with the most.

Mills goes on to say, "What we want our children to imagine depends upon what we want our children to be. As Christians, we want them not just to learn to understand and analyze rightly, but to react rightly because they see the world rightly. We want our children to know by instinct or intuition what is the right answer, the right action, the right attitude.

"Revulsion is a much better protection from the force of the passions than an intellectual understanding by itself. To feel 'This is yucky' is not a final protection from sin, but it is better than thinking 'This is wrong' but feeling 'This is okay.' Lust offers the paradigmatic case (examples come quickly to mind), but this is true of pride, gluttony, envy, and all the rest, even sloth" (Ibid., p.21).

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Without the right stories our knowledge will conflict with feelings. And, as Mills implied, our knowledge usually gives way to our feelings, our desires. Jonathan Edwards concurs, “A man never, in any instance, wills any thing contrary to his desires... It is that motive (i.e. desire) which, as it stands in the view of the mind, is the strongest, that determines the will” (*The Freedom of the Will*, p. 4, 6). In other words, our decisions are determined by the strongest desires of the moment.

We like to think that we make decisions based upon our intellects. We like to think most of our choices are the result of reasonable, rational reflections. The pros and cons are carefully weighed on the scale, and then we make our decision. But do we? If this is so, why do we “decide” to watch TV instead of reading the Bible, when the scale clearly tilts in the direction of the latter? Why do we “decide” to sleep in on Sunday morning, rather than go to church? Because of a biblically-informed, conscious decision? Doubtful! Most daily decisions, including decisions to sin, result from something much deeper within us. We are driven by desires, which are fueled by stories, as well as images, music, video games, people we come into contact with, etc.—which are really all part of the larger story.

This is elementary, but powerful, so I’d like to flesh it out with a couple of examples. Many years ago now, a college freshman approached me after a sermon about a verse I referred to in passing. The verse was Ephesians 5:4: “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.” This student, who grew up the church by the way, confessed that Ephesians 5:4 was an apt description of the conversations that he and his friends had on a regular basis. For a generation that has grown up watching perverse sitcoms, placing themselves habitually in those kinds of stories (we can’t help but do this), the natural outcome will be relating to one another in a way that mirrors the stories: sexual innuendos, crude humor, putting others down, no respect for authority and non-stop joking. Observe how kids, or adults for that matter, relate to each other. Rarely do they have serious or civil conversations, most of the time they entertain each other like they’re performing in a *Simpson’s* episode. Hollywood likes to say that they merely reflect culture, but the truth is they’re also creating a particular culture by the stories they tell. And the stories (which take place in imaginary places) that we live in for extended periods of time end up transferring to the real world in which we live.

A frightening example of how this works comes from the Columbine High School massacre by two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. The shooting ended with the deaths of 12 students and a teacher, as well as the wounding of 24 others before Eric and Dylan committed suicide. Sociologists and psychologists debate the exact cause of the rampage, but it’s clear that the stories of their world were very dark, from its gothic culture to its heavy metal music to its violent video games. After the tragedy, I heard an interview with a federal official expressing his sheer amazement at how calm Eric and Dylan had been. He mentioned that trained FBI field agents would have had difficulty being as calm as the two students were, due to the adrenal rush that such an intense situation would normally produce. In his opinion, the two students had steady trigger fingers, because years of playing violent, video games was like simulator training for such a killing. He went on to say that their calm one-shot per person approach exactly mimicked a video game. My conclusion is that their incredible calmness was due to, what I will call, “story transfer.” They merely transferred the video story on the screen to the real story at the school. And it’s horrifying how easily that transfer occurred.

Proverbs declares, “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Pro. 23:7a, KJV). I hope by now we see that this thinking is far deeper than the recitation of Bible verses, however good that may be; it also involves the imagination. As parents, our goal is *not* to get our children to conform to a biblical standard of righteousness—that’s relatively easy to do with a big stick. Our goal is to get our children to *love* the standard. If they don’t love the standard, they will quickly abandon it once they are out on their own, which statistics tell us most church kids are doing in droves. This means that good stories, images, metaphors and phrases, which Proverbs liberally employs, are not optional, but essential for demonstrating the beauty of the Christian life, so that any other way of living will seem ugly and repulsive by comparison.

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