



Active Learning

Ideas for Teaching Proverbs

By Anne Stewart

A. The appeal of wisdom in ancient and modern texts

Proverbs uses different means of appeal to communicate its wisdom, some of which are still common in many modern cultural “wisdom” texts. For example, most magazines aimed at teens feature beautiful models on their covers, implicitly suggesting that following the advice of the magazine will result in the desirable features of good looks, athletic bodies, or slim figures.

Ask the students to bring in sources from their own lives (magazines, popular songs, TV commercials, etc.) to analyze what kind of wisdom or worldview they promote, as well as how they make their appeal and advance their wisdom as “the best.” What makes these texts *persuasive*? How do we evaluate their content as *wisdom*? What criteria should be used? Compare with how the book of Proverbs makes its appeal and also offers certain criteria to the student to measure whether particular desires will be ultimately helpful or harmful.

B. The nature of proverbs

A proverb is a short, pithy saying that communicates a piece of wisdom. It often uses rhyme, rhythm, or sound play to make it memorable and easy to repeat to others. Ask the students to compile a list of modern proverbs and discuss how their form makes them “stick,” as well as what values they represent. What themes are common to modern American proverbs? Compare with proverbs from the book of Proverbs—what themes are common in ancient Israelite wisdom? Do they still provide useful advice?

The use of proverbs is highly contextual. The book of Proverbs contains proverbs that contradict each other (e.g., Proverbs 26:4–5), and it indicates that part of being wise is to know the right thing to say at the right time. Ask the students to discuss how to use proverbs—how do we discern what is the right word at the right time? As a modern example, what advice would be more appropriate for a friend who is considering taking a new risk: “look before you leap” or “fortune favors the brave”? What factors are involved in discernment?