

The Character of Our Words (Proverbs 10)

Proverbs: The Wisdom of God as a Way of Life

Zionsville Fellowship | September 26, 2025 | Drew Hunter

Every one of us is moving along a path toward a future version of ourselves.

The question for each of us is, do you know where you're going? Do you have a clear picture of who your future self should be? And is that future picture truly wise and good? Is it the best version of yourself?

Many of us don't have a clear picture of where we're heading. I don't just mean what we want to do—maybe steps in a career, when to retire, where to live. I mean our character—the kind of person you are trying to become. We don't have a plan for our character and the kind of person we are trying to become.

God gives us a clear picture in his word. Do you know what it is? It is Jesus. The New Testament repeatedly says that God's plan is to make us like Christ. And the wonder of this is that as we become more like Jesus, we do not become *less* like ourselves, but more. We become more fully alive, more fully ourselves. We become a Christlike version of ourselves, which is the best version.

And the Bible says that this should be our intentional ambition. We should have a picture of how we can become like Christ, and we should be taking steps to get there with his help.

And one way to describe what Jesus is like, and what we can become—is righteous and wise.

That's the language Proverbs uses to describe this life. This was written first for Israel's kings—they were to be the pacesetters in true wisdom and righteousness. And they would then lead the people to become wise and righteous.

Although every king failed—one son of David did not. Jesus came to live in the way of wisdom perfectly. And he not only forgives us for failing; he leads us to follow him.

As we look at Proverbs, we are seeing a portrait of Jesus, and a portrait of our future selves. This is the vision of life that God sets out ahead of us.

This morning, Proverbs 10 gives us a portrait of the righteous and wise life.

This is a portrait of the person God wants us to become. Wisdom is about character formation. It is a way of life and is relevant to every moment we live, every decision we make, every word we speak.

Here in Proverbs 10 we see a basic portrait of the righteous—what motivates him, how he views money, and how he uses his mouth.

Elementary Wisdom for Character Formation

Before we do that, I want to introduce us to this section of Proverbs more broadly.

I'm emphasizing in this series how Proverbs is a curriculum in character formation. It is not randomly organized like a playlist on shuffle. Yes, there is certainly a lot of randomness in smaller sections. But the whole book was carefully organized into collections. And these collections are organized into a progressive curriculum. The focus of wisdom is character formation—and the progression of the book matches our own progression in maturity.

We just finished chapters 1–9, which was beginning wisdom. That whole section is bookended by verses that said, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” That is the starting point of wisdom—you have to have a trusting reverence for God as the creator and savior. God designed the world, and you have to be open to his design. There is a givenness to reality, and the starting point for wisdom is respecting that reality.

You cannot live however you want and expect it to work out for you. You cannot make up your own morality. Western civilization is currently engaging in an experiment of creating our own reality, and it's not working. The beginning of wisdom is respecting God and respecting reality as he made it.

Proverbs 1–9 is a father pleading with his sons to desire wisdom, to seek wisdom, and to keep wisdom.

This morning we begin the second section—which is chapters 10–15. This moves from beginning wisdom to elementary wisdom. Here are four things to we need to know in order to read this well.

First, this is about character formation.

Wisdom is not just intellectual. It is about character development. This is why the main character in proverbs is the righteous. It is holding out a portrait of a wise and righteous person. This is a person who rightly orders his life according to what is true, good, and beautiful. He fits in line with the moral structure of the universe.

Second, this is poetry.

Chapter 10 begins the “proverbial sayings” we associate with proverbs. These are poetic statements. One of the marks of poetry is its efficiency. It packs a lot in a few words. But you typically cannot unlock poetry without slowing down and thinking. This is because it doesn't use all the words that it could. It's not like prose. It uses a few words to say a lot—so we have to slow down and think it through. It is giving us wisdom concentrate.

The most common way to unlock the meaning of a proverb is to see that it presents truth with two lines. This is called parallelism. It puts two lines in parallel—and you need to think through how they relate. Very often if you read it quickly and think you understand it; you don't. It will not yield its meaning without thinking it through.

Third, these are not guarantees, but generalities.

They are not promises, but probabilities. Many of these proverbs show us how the world works *in general*. But there are of course exceptions. Yes, if you work hard, you will make money—but not always. Proverbs isn't stupid. It knows about exceptions, and it often gives them. So we need to keep that in mind.

Finally, it teaches us through contrasts.

This is especially true of this section in chapters 10–15. The vast majority of these simply contrast two kinds of people. It is contrasting the wise and foolish, or the righteous and the wicked. It will get more complex later in the book; but this is elementary. It's basic. It's just giving stark contrasts of two ways to live.

This teaches us to look out at the world, and compare and contrast different ways of living. In any moment, you could move this way or that way. You could think this thought or that thought. You could say this kind of thing or that kind of thing. These decisions mark every moment of our lives. And proverbs give you ways to think about all of these moments.

Now, as we look at chapter 10, here is what it is mainly about:

This is a portrait of the righteous and wise life in contrast to the wicked and foolish life.ⁱ The righteous is the main character in Proverbs—it describes the person who fears God, respects reality, and wisely lives in line with it. This is the ideal human—the best version of who God made each of us to be.

We won't talk about every proverb here. We'll look at three main aspects of this portrait: his motivation, his view of money, and his use of words.

1. The Motivation of the Righteous

First, what motivates the righteous?

This chapter is filled with contrasts between the righteous and the wicked. And it especially focuses on the outcomes of each life. Solomon is motivating us to choose wisdom, and choose goodness, and choose character. And he does it by appealing to our motivations.

The Bible never just says, “be good for goodness sake.” God made us with desires, and he appeals to various motivations to motivate us to become a righteous person.ⁱⁱ

Proverbs 10 does this by leading us to see the outcomes of different ways of living. This is not just about, “if you do this, then this will happen.” It’s bigger than this. It is the outcome of our character. It is how our character determines our destiny.ⁱⁱⁱ

Here are a few things that should motivate us. Not all of them are going to sound profound, and some of them may seem obvious. But even if it sounds obvious—we each need to ask ourselves if we are actually letting these motivations function in our lives as we should.

First, the joy of your parents.

This is verse 1: “A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.”

This contrasts two kinds of people: the wise son and the foolish son. And it contrasts the outcomes of their lives: A wise son makes a glad father; a foolish son makes a sad mother.

This is poetry, it’s condensed, and it’s efficient. It leaves gaps that you have to fill in. It leaves implications that you have to discern.

This is saying that a wise son will make a glad father *and* mother. And a foolish son will make a sorrowful father *and* mother. We have to fill in the gaps. And this is not just true of a son, but a daughter as well.

So, here’s the point: Your character will determine the emotional well-being of your parents. And that is supposed to be a key, God-given motivation for your life.

Many of you know this as parents. You have children that have strayed, that have ruined their lives, that have been foolish. And you are grieved every day by it. And you are living with the consequences of it. Others of you are filled with joy in life, and it’s largely because of the character of your grown children.

Yet this Proverb is here to speak to all of us as children. It’s saying: think of your parents. They brought you into the world. They raised you. They poured their life into you. The way you live your life will either make a return to them or not. If you are wise—if you fear the Lord and walk in wisdom—you will fill them with joy all their days. If you are foolish—if you reject Christ and are unfaithful to your promises—you will bring them deep grief.

This is a legitimate motivation to pursue a wise life. Think of your parents and grandparents.

Verse 5 gives us a similar motivation: “He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame.” The son who is diligent to work hard in the harvest in the summer is wise. But the lazy one doesn’t work bring shame. Brings shame to who? His parents. The son who never launches, who never holds down a job, who is lazy, who plays video games all the time, who is always in debt—that reflects on the parents.

So, here's the question: is one of your aims in life to make your parents happy? Now, I know some of you don't have parents anymore. Or your parents are not wise—and so it actually grieves them that you are following Christ. If that's the case—then aim ultimately to please your heavenly father. But if you have generally faithful parents, do you aim to please them? That is a good, God-given, important motivation. It honors them.

Here's a second motivation: making money. Being wealthy rather than being in poverty.

Notice the motivations of verses 3–4: “The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked. 4 A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.” This is giving a basic motivation: Do you want to be in poverty, or do you want to have wealth? How you live very often contributes to that. God takes care of his people, and he blesses your diligence.

Some Christians promote a poverty theology that says money is bad. We should never want money. If we ever get it, we should give it all away. Yes, the Bible teaches us to be radically generous with our money. And we should not trust in our wealth. But being poor is not a virtue in itself. In fact, if you are poor, you often don't have money to give to others.

So Proverbs is saying: It's good to work hard, work smart, and find wealth. That's a legitimate motivation. If you want to get out of poverty and debt—one of the factors is diligence. Work hard and find opportunities.

Remember, this is elementary wisdom. Future sections of proverbs will add nuance and complications. But this is a foundational principle. Work leads to wealth.

A third motivation is an honored reputation.

This is verse 7: “The memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot.” Let's think this through. Notice the contrast. This contrasts “the memory of the righteous” versus “the name of the wicked.” Those both have to do with someone's reputation—how people think of and remember them.

And the contrast is this: the reputation of the righteous will be a blessing to people.^{iv} It will endure, it will bring joy. Think of the people who have passed away, and whose memory is a blessing to you. But the reputation of the wicked will rot—it will decay and fade away.

This is a proper motivation. It's not unspiritual to think: When I die, I want my memory to be a blessing. This is a God-given good motivation.

So, how do you want to be remembered? How do you want your neighbors, and coworkers, and children, and great grandchildren to remember you? Do you want to make an impact? Do you want them to be blessed by the very thought of you? Then let that motivation you to become more and more like Christ.

Here's the final motivation we'll consider: you don't want to ruin your life right now or forever.

This is the strongest motivation in the chapter. Over and over, this chapter says: do you want to ruin your life? Do you want to be destroyed forever? Or do you want to live long, lived blessed, and live forever?

Notice what happens to a babbling fool in verse 8: "a babbling fool will come to ruin."

Verse 14, "the mouth of a fool brings ruin near."

Verse 16, "The wage of the righteous leads to life, the gain of the wicked to sin."

Verse 25, "When the tempest passes, the wicked is no more, but the righteous is established forever."

Verse 27, "The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short."

The wise see beyond their immediate actions. They look beyond their immediate desires. They look beyond how their actions only affect themselves in the next few years.

Think about your life and your character.

If your parents invested in you, are you making a return? Are you bringing them joy?
As the next generations remember you after your death, what will they remember?
And where is your path heading—are you following Christ on the path of wisdom to life;
or do you want your path to come to ruin in the end?

These are the motivations of the righteous.

2. How the Righteous View Work and Wealth

Second, how the righteous view work and wealth. They value both, but for the right reasons.

- Verse 2, "Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death."

Notice the contrast. It is not between "treasures gained by wickedness" and "treasures gained by righteousness." It is not just a contrast between the way you get your money—either through deception or integrity. No, this is contrasting money gained by sin, and *righteousness* itself.

And it is saying: if you gain wealth through wickedness, it will not ultimately profit. It will not deliver you from death. But the wise life is not just to gain wealth through righteousness—but to simply *be* righteous. To gain the true wealth *of* righteousness. To value virtue over money.

The Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke put it this way: “Paradoxically, the wicked use others to store up physical assets for themselves and lose their lives; and the righteous use their resources to serve others and store up life for themselves.”^v

- Verse 3 continues the theme: “The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.”

This shows that God will ultimately feed and satisfy his people. But whatever the wicked crave and long for, he will not give them. This is often true in life even now—but not always. It is only a guarantee in an ultimate sense—when we look beyond the horizon of this life.

- Then verse four continues the theme, but it shows our role in wealth and poverty: “A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.”

Laziness leads to poverty; diligence leads to wealth. This is not always true, but it is often true. There is a clear connection between work and wealth.

- Let’s jump down to verse 15 to see a final note about wealth.

Proverbs will regularly say that money is not ultimate; and that wisdom is far better. But it is not negative toward wealth. It is against trusting in money, but it is not against seeking it. Half the time it’s telling us to seek it; the other half to not trust it.^{vi}

So, verse 15 observes, “A rich man’s wealth is his strong city; the poverty of the poor is their ruin.” Wealth is a gift—it is like fortified city walls around you. It provides food and safety. Without wealth, you’re ruined. The righteous do not despise wealth and riches; they work hard, and they value wealth, but they do not trust in it. They trust in the Lord.

3. How the Righteous Use their Words

Finally, how do the righteous use their words?

We’ve seen how they view money; but how do they use their mouths? This is the largest theme in the chapter. It’s repeated over and over.

Here are three aspects that this chapter focuses on—we can summarize them with three words: limits, lies, and life. Limit your words, don’t lie with your words, and give life with your words. Or—make them few, make them true, and use them to renew.

First, make them few.

Limit your words. Restrain your speech. Don't let your speaking outpace your listening.

Verse 8: "The wise of heart will receive commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin."

Here's how to read a proverb like this. If the contrast doesn't seem to make sense at first, it's because there are gaps that we need to fill. It is putting two people in contrast, and we are to fill in the gaps.

So, for example, this contrasts "the wise of heart" with "the babbling fool." Why contrast someone's heart, with someone's speech? It's not—it's comparing the heart and speech of both of them, but we have to fill in the gaps. So, this is contrasting the wise of heart who do *not* just babble; they restrain their speech and speak with wisdom.

And notice the other part of the contrast: The wise of heart "will receive commandments" but the babbling fool "will come to ruin." If the wise of heart receives commandments, it means that the babbling fool does not. Why? Because he's too busy talking to listen. And if the babbling fool will come to ruin, what does that mean for the wise of heart? He will live.

So, then we put this together, and here's what this is saying more fully: The wise of heart listen to God's commands, restrain their speech, and speak wisely, and they will live. But the babbling fool has a foolish heart, he does not receive commandments, because he's too busy talking foolishness, and he'll come to ruin.

This is how proverbs works—it's very efficient. There is a lot to think about. You have to compare the parts, and fill in the gaps. And the point here is: don't be a fool who just talks all the time; be wise of heart and receive commands, restrain your speech, and speak wisely.

Verse 19 gives another angle on this: "When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent." We can sin with our words. And the more words we speak, the more risk we have of sinning with them.

This is partly why James says, "Not many of you should be teachers." It's because when you teach others, your words are being multiplied. You are not just speaking one-on-one, but to many. I think James would say, "not many of you should be podcasters." And I think many of us should be careful about who we listen to. Because those who run podcasts all the time are speaking many, many words—and it's influencing us.

So, limit your words. Let them be few. Don't let your speaking outpace your listening.

Second, let your words be true. Don't use them to lie or slander.

Verse 18 says, "The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, and whoever utters slander is a fool." These two lines describe the same kind of person. This person has hatred in his heart, and that leads him to lie about the person he hates. And he utters slander about him.

The insight here is that hatred in the heart leads to lying with your lips. And this means that if you lie about someone, or you slander them, it's not neutral. It's not just a slip. It's not just that you didn't mean it. It reveals hatred in your heart.

This is a huge problem today. It's made worse by our news feeds, podcasts, and social media. So many well-meaning people believe what they hear from their favorite podcasts, or their favorite news source, or their favorite social media accounts. But there is a real problem of slander from all of those today.

They select facts to fit their narrative about someone. They include half-truths, which lead us away from the whole truth. They include innuendoes. They distort reality and exaggerate to promote their idea. They quote people out of context.

And we are fooling ourselves if we do not think we are susceptible to believe their lies. If you don't have access to the actual truth of a matter, you are vulnerable to believe lies. And right now it's hard to get right to the truth of what's really going on in the world. This is why I am a huge proponent of being very limited on listening to podcasts and reading news stories—and just going straight to the primary sources. Listen to the presidential candidates full speeches. Read the party's whole platform. Read full books, not just book reviews. When someone is quoted in social media—find the full clip and listen to it.

And personally—regarding gossip and slander—if you are concerned because you heard something about someone, go directly to them. Many of us know what it's like to have lies spread about you, and you only find out later. You wish someone would have just come to you and asked if it was true so you could clear it up right away.

Go to the primary sources because that's where you find the truth.

Proverbs is teaching us to respect reality and live in line with it. The reason why lying is unrighteous is because it distorts reality, and it flows from hatred. Which means we must be people who speak the truth out of love.

Third, use your words to renew—use them to give life.

Verse 11, "The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence."

This contrasts the mouth of the righteous with the mouth of the wicked—which is their speech. One is a fountain of life, the other conceals violence. So think this through: One has life-giving waters inside, and it flows out through speech, to give life to others. But the wicked has violence in the heart, and the speech conceals it. The righteous desire to bless, and their words give blessing. The wicked desire to harm, and they try to hide it with their words.

Jesus is the greatest example of the righteous. He was a life-giving fountain. We gather around his words like ancient people would gather to a well with fresh water. And with his words, he gives abundant life. He heals us. He gives grace. He forgives. He encourages.

And now we are to receive this, and overflow with the same kind of life-giving speech.

Verse 21 is similar: “The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense.”

The lips of the righteous is their speech. The contrast is the fool who lacks sense. When we put these together, we see that the righteous has sense, and therefore he speaks wisdom. And in speaking wisdom, the righteous feed many. He nourishes them. The contrast is the fool who dies for his lack of sense. So the righteous live and they give life through their words; and the fool dies and his words do not nourish anyone.

Your words are powerful. Make them few, make them true, and use them to renew.

And one final observation about words: Your words are an expression of you.

Proverbs says our words flow from the heart, and so they reveal the heart. The heart in Proverbs is the core of our personality. Notice how proverbs connects our hearts and our words in verses 8 and 20.

Verse 8, “The wise of heart will receive commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin.” Notice it contrasts the “wise of heart” with “a babbling fool.” The wise of heart receives God’s words, and so does not babble—his words are few and true. The babbling fool does not receive commandments; he is too busy talking about his opinion.

And verse 20, “The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the heart of the wicked is of little worth.” Notice again the comparison. It’s not the tongue of the righteous and the tongue of the wicked—it’s the tongue of the righteous and the heart of the wicked. We are supposed to fill in the gaps: this is about the heart and the speech of both of them.

And what do we learn as we put these two lines together and fill in the gaps: The heart of the righteous is of much worth, and so their words are choice silver and valuable. But the heart of the wicked is of little worth, and so their words are worthless. And this is why God’s word is infinitely valuable.

Your words flow from the heart, and they reveal your heart. They reveal who you really are. Jesus knew Proverbs, which is he said, “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). And “The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (vv. 35–27).

Our words—the ones we speak and the ones we write and type—reveal our hearts.

Here's what this means.

We've seen a portrait of the righteous. And we see how we fail. We see a vision of where our future should be—and we see how far we have to go. If everything we say and write reveals our heart—then it reveals our need. Our need for forgiveness and transformation.

And so that's why we have to see the portrait of the righteous is the portrait of Christ. And out of the abundance of his heart, he speaks words that are few. Words that are thoroughly true. And words that renew. His words give life.

So, let's receive the true, life-giving words of the gospel as we end. You and I cannot fix our mouths, because we cannot fix our hearts. And that's why Jesus came. He calls us to repent of the words which reveal our hearts—and he invites us to be forgiven and renewed. Repent of the sins of your speech, and trust him for grace. Receive his forgiveness. Receive his renewal. And rely on his grace and Spirit's power to speak what is true and what will renew.

ⁱ The “righteous” shows up here more often than any other chapter in this sub-collection of chs 11-14, and also in the entirety of the second subcollection (16:1-22:16). This is fitting, since “the righteous” is *the* ideal character in proverbs. See Chris Ansberry, *Proverbs*, 356).

ⁱⁱ See Ansberry, referring to Anne Stewart, on p356.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, 15.

^{iv} Waltke notes that it may refer to how the name of the righteous may be used when invoking a blessing upon someone (1:458).

^v Bruce Waltke, 1:453.

^{vi} Waltke, 1:463