

Abstract

Through Proverbs, Scripture conveys concise yet deeply memorable lessons about life and faith. Proverbs demonstrates literary excellence that transcends the banality of daily life, often employing unfamiliar expressions that capture attention, not through abstract terminology but by means of vivid language that awakens the reader. To create aphorisms, Proverbs draws upon extraordinary powers of observation, insight, and rhetorical skill not common to ordinary people. Despite its literary brilliance and theological significance, preachers often hesitate to preach from Proverbs. Even those who attempt it find it difficult, largely because of the challenge of discerning its structure. Some sections consist of collective units with clear themes, while many individual proverbs present diverse topics that emerge like pop-up windows, making it difficult to grasp a unified theme. For this reason, homileticsians have long wrestled with how to construct sermons from Proverbs. Unfortunately, most previous studies have merely enumerated the biblical-theological content of Proverbs, offering only brief comments on homiletical method, thus leaving preachers without practical steps for sermon preparation. This article seeks to address that gap by both reviewing prior scholarship and proposing concrete steps for preparing sermons on Proverbs. After outlining the literary and theological features of Proverbs and surveying homiletical attempts to preach from it, this paper presents specific techniques that remain faithful to the text while drawing out its richness and depth. The conclusion suggests areas requiring further research for more effective preaching of Proverbs.

Keywords: preaching Proverbs, individual proverbs, collective proverbs, central message of the text, relevance, application

Introduction

In every age, people have sought to convey life lessons in short yet profound sayings. In Western culture, examples include aphorisms such as “*no pain, no gain*,” while in Eastern culture, four-character idioms such as “苦盡甘來” (*sweetness after hardship*) illustrate the same impulse. Through Proverbs, Scripture imparts succinct but unforgettable teachings about life and faith. Leland Ryken describes the literary brilliance and significance of Proverbs as follows:

“Proverbs demonstrates literary excellence that transcends ordinary speech. It frequently employs unfamiliar expressions that capture our attention, awakening us with vivid, almost visible language. In order to create aphorisms, Proverbs employs extraordinary

powers of observation and insight, coupled with rhetorical skill beyond that of ordinary people. This is the literary gift of Proverbs.”

Despite such literary excellence and the importance of its message, preachers often avoid preaching from Proverbs. Those who do muster the courage frequently find it difficult. This article therefore aims to summarize the academic discussions to date regarding the preaching of Proverbs, and to provide a concrete sequence of homiletical steps. First, I will briefly consider the features of Proverbs and previous theological and homiletical attempts to incorporate them into preaching. Then I will introduce practical techniques for preaching Proverbs in ways faithful to the text while drawing upon its richness. Finally, I will conclude by identifying areas that require further research for more effective preaching of Proverbs.

I. Characteristics of Proverbs and the Difficulty of Preaching Them

1. Questions Raised about Preaching Proverbs

Thomas G. Long, who may rightly be called the pioneer of genre-sensitive preaching, observed that Proverbs is especially difficult to preach. He asked, for example, whether a verse such as Proverbs 15:1—*“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger”*—is suitable as a sermon text. Although the verse is clearly useful as moral counsel, its lack of explicit theological reference raises the question of whether it provides sufficient grounding for Christian proclamation. Scholars note that most of Proverbs is based on close observation of human society and offers practical advice for living wisely. With the exception of verses such as Proverbs 9:10—*“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding”*—explicit references to God are relatively sparse. Thus, one wonders whether these sayings, which often sound more like moral instructions or pragmatic advice, can provide an adequate message for Christians called to follow the narrow path of Christ’s suffering rather than worldly success.

2. Theological and Covenantal Dimensions

This question has long been central to both the study and preaching of Proverbs. Steven W. Smith, in seeking to offer a method for preaching Proverbs, insists that Proverbs is not an absolute guarantee that wise or moral behavior will always produce peace and prosperity. Rather, Proverbs presupposes the reality of God and his Word, and addresses how life is to be lived concretely before him. Furthermore, Proverbs must be understood in light of the covenant: the blessings it promises were originally given under the Mosaic covenant (cf. Deut. 28:1–14). Under the new covenant, however, these blessings are ultimately fulfilled in Christ’s kingdom. Thus, Proverbs should not be read as mere secular morality or worldly success, but as covenantal wisdom pointing toward higher, eschatological blessings.

Long likewise warns that dismissing Proverbs as either excessively moralistic or insufficiently theological risks silencing one of Scripture's precious voices in the choir of faith.

II. Steps for Text-Driven Preaching of Proverbs

1. Identify the Type of Text

As with the Psalms, the first step in preaching Proverbs is to determine whether the passage is a **collection of proverbs** or an **individual proverb**. Collective proverbs present a unified theme across a series of verses or chapters (e.g., Prov. 1–9), while individual proverbs stand alone or in small clusters (e.g., Prov. 10–22; 25–29). The preacher's approach must differ accordingly: continuous exposition suits collective proverbs, while thematic selection is often required for individual proverbs.

2. Examine the Context of the Text

Though some scholars (e.g., R.N. Whybray) deny that Proverbs has meaningful literary contexts, others (e.g., Duane A. Garrett) argue that even individual sayings often appear in small contextual clusters. For example, Proverbs 26:4 and 26:5 offer seemingly contradictory counsel about answering a fool, but when read together, they reveal the nuanced wisdom of discerning when to speak and when to remain silent. Thus, preachers must attend both to the independence and to the contextual connections of individual sayings.

3. Determine the Sermon Form

Collective passages with clear structure (e.g., Prov. 1–9; 30–31) lend themselves to sequential exposition. In contrast, chapters dominated by diverse individual sayings (e.g., Prov. 10–22) require thematic sermons that gather verses around topics such as marriage, speech, anger, or the heart. Where verses are abundant, the preacher may divide them into series sermons or focus on representative texts.

4. Situate the Text within the Larger Structure

When preaching a collective section, it is essential to show where the chosen passage fits within the broader structure. This enables the congregation to follow the flow of the book and to see how the passage contributes to the whole.

5. Write a Central Message of the Text (CMT)

Every sermon should articulate a **central message of the text** in a single, memorable sentence. This involves: (1) writing a subject statement; (2) reframing it as a question (why, what, how); (3) answering the question; and (4) combining the question and

answer into one concise sentence. For example, Proverbs 11:16–23 contains various sayings about wise and foolish actions, but its central message can be summarized: “*Our actions shape the outcomes of our lives.*”

6. Structure the Sermon around the Central Message

Having identified the CMT, the preacher should introduce it early and organize the sermon around it, using the text’s details as supporting evidence. Proverbs’ brevity and memorability should be mirrored in the sermon’s own phrasing.

7. Interpret Proverbs in Light of the Whole Canon

Proverbs must be read in light of both Old and New Testaments. For instance, Proverbs 22:6 (“Train up a child...”) can be illuminated by Deuteronomy 6 and Ephesians 6. Preaching Proverbs canonically expands its message beyond moral advice to the fullness of God’s redemptive plan in Christ.

8. Incorporate the Text’s Contrasts

Proverbs often employs contrastive parallelism (e.g., Prov. 14:33). Preachers should highlight these juxtapositions to show the stark difference between the way of wisdom and the way of folly, guiding hearers toward the path of righteousness.

9. Employ the Text’s Imagery

Proverbs abounds with vivid images—springs of water, fire, animals, crowns, torches—which serve to imprint lessons on the imagination. Following Warren Wiersbe’s advice, preachers should not only state ideas but also *show* them through imagery, adapting ancient metaphors to contemporary contexts when necessary.

10. Ensure Relevance and Application

Finally, preaching Proverbs must move beyond exegesis to relevance and application. Because the human condition of sin and the saving grace of God are constants across time, Proverbs speaks directly to the present. Application may be general (principles for life) or specific (concrete steps for families, churches, or society). As John Broadus insisted, application is not an optional supplement but the essential goal of preaching.

Conclusion

Many preachers acknowledge the difficulty of preaching from Proverbs, primarily due to its elusive structure. Some portions are clearly collective units, but many consist of individual sayings with diverse themes. Previous scholarship has often emphasized

biblical-theological insights while neglecting practical homiletical steps. To address this gap, this article has proposed ten essential steps for text-driven preaching of Proverbs.

Further research is still required:

1. How can individual proverbs not belonging to clear clusters be preached with coherence?
2. How can cultural and social backgrounds be utilized for relevance without undermining Proverbs' brevity and force?
3. How can Proverbs be faithfully connected to the New Testament and the gospel of Christ?

Though challenging, the continued study and preaching of Proverbs will enable the wisdom of God to resound from the pulpits of the church, enriching the people of God with lives shaped by both theology and wisdom.