Chapter Three

The Content of Character Formation

Character formation involves a journey; process plays a key role in wisdom's approach to moral instruction a truth which fits well with the image of path or way that the sage is fond of employing (e.g., 4:10–19). Wisdom is not, however, just about going through a process. For the biblical sage, process also involves the communication of a clear set of moral values. Wisdom instruction is not nebulous. It has a specific curriculum to pass on to its students, which in part, is identified in the collections of sayings found in chapters 10–29. In identifying the contents, one gains a better understanding of the type of character the family and faith community seek to build. The "what" in wisdom's agenda is as important as the "how."

WISDOM VERSUS VALUES-CLARIFICATION

Wisdom takes a direct approach to moral instruction in terms of its core values, clearly communicating this core set of values to its students.[1] This flies in the face of certain strands of thought that believe all values are personal

1. Significantly William Bennett, the former U.S. Secretary of Education under the Reagan administration, advocates a direct approach to teaching moral values. He argues that being a teacher in public education implies that the one in that position deliberately seeks to influence students for the better through instruction and through example. Bennett, "Moral Literacy and the Formation of Character," 134.

such as a "values-clarification" philosophy.[2] With values-clarification,[3] each individual decides which values are appropriate in order to achieve the person's fullest potential. The highest value in this system is self-actualization. The important question then becomes, which values will bring about self-actualization?

According to values-clarification, the values we hold to are inferred from the choices we make every day. For example, we choose how to use our time, spend our money, and invest our energy. These choices express our personal values. The task is to clarify those values for each individual in order to make life more fulfilling. In the process of identifying one's value system, new values are also discovered and integrated with the old. Therefore values cannot be imposed on an individual from an outside source. They must come from within the person, and thus values cannot be taught. Teachers can only guide students through a process of discovering themselves.

The values-clarification school of thought places emphasis on the process by which individuals become more aware of the values to which they already hold. They focus on the procedure of valuing rather than on the product, "on becoming rather than being, on potential rather than current state."[4] Louis Raths and his colleagues describe one seven-step process of values-clarification:

1. Choosing freely without restriction.
2. Choosing from viable alternatives.
3. Choosing after reflecting on the consequences of each alternative.
4. Being satisfied with one's choice.
5. Publicly affirming the choice.

2. Raths, Harmin, and Simon, *Values and Teaching*. This also appears to be the perspective of Lawrence Kohlberg: The "teaching of virtue is the asking of questions and pointing of the way, not the giving of answers. Moral education is the leading of men upward, not the putting into the mind of knowledge that was not there before." Kohlberg, "Education for Justice," 58.

3. Values clarification may not be formally as active a discipline as it was a couple of decades ago. Its principles and philosophy, however, are still vibrant within the field of ethics. Philosopher, Sarah Conrad, makes this statement in an email correspondence on November 12, 2014, "Yes, values clarification is still a central point in ethical discussions. One must be able to identify a value and understand the source of it in order to truly assess the efficacy of it." Conrad is assistant professor of philosophy at St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, MN. Link to philosophy faculty: http://www.stcloudstate.edu/philosophy/faculty.asp

4. Clouse, *Teaching for Moral Growth*, 303.

6. Acting on one's choice.
7. Incorporating the choice as a habit into one's life.[5]

The first three steps entail the act of choosing a value, the next two include celebrating the value chosen, and the last two call upon the individual to incorporate the value chosen into her life.[6] The whole purpose of the process is to unlock the hidden potential that lies within each individual enabling that person to experience self-actualization.

The values-clarification school has provided a great service in identifying a process for better understanding values, but its weakness is that it leaves to the individual the task of deciding which values to accept or reject. Often what individuals and the church need to hear is not reflections on their own perspective but an authoritative perspective that comes from outside, the authority of Scripture and tradition. Certain moral values are non-negotiable; they are essential for the well-being of the community.

The principles that underlie the values-clarification philosophy strikingly represent a disturbing trend in postmodern ethics and character formation. It is radically individualistic with the locus of ethical truth being placed squarely within each person equally and authoritatively. There is no room for any standards of character imposed from without. While the idea of some external set of principles unnerves postmodern conceptions of uninhibited freedom, one of the most foundation truths of Christian faith is that there is an external authority, God, and as a result there are objective standards to which people are held. The sages, far removed from this particular feature of contemporary culture, had no qualms with assuming a set of finite virtues which the process of character formation sought to inculcate and a set of equally real vices that moral education needed to warn against.

The wisdom community developed a set of values, which it expected its students to adhere. Individuals did not have a choice in picking or choosing from them. Yet even though the sages offer direct instruction about moral values, they do so more often in the form of making observations than issuing commands. To put it another way, in the sentence literature (Proverbs 10–22 and 25–29), there are more "sayings" (observations) than "admonitions" (commands). The sages do not force the values on their students. Wisdom respects the autonomy of the individual, which allows each student the choice of either accepting or rejecting the instruction. In the book of Proverbs evidence abounds of those who chose to reject sapiential instruction. References are made to the rebellious and foolish son and to

5. Raths, Harmin, and Simon, *Values and Teaching*, 46.
6. Clouse, *Teaching for Moral Growth*, 306.

the scoffer (10:1b; 13:1; 29:15). Unless individuals are given the option to choose, it remains questionable as to whether they can internalize the values they are taught.

WISDOM'S VIRTUES

Contrary to the claims of William McKane, the religious and ethical dimensions of Proverbs are not later editions.[7] McKane proposes that the earliest proverbs in the collection are secular in nature and it was not until later that those dealing with the religious and ethical issues were added. Proverbs, however, is not a book that only sporadically contains ethical concerns. As Tomás Frydrych argues,

> the whole of Proverbs is essentially about ethics, the distinction between good and evil is truly all pervasive. The book contains no technical advice on conducting any common activity, be it agriculture, skilled work or trade. On the occasions where such daily activities are touched upon, the sages' concerns are confined to their ethical aspects. In no sense, thus, can the book as a whole, or any of its parts, be perceived as a manual for 'mundane realities' (to use McKane's terminology), for such realities are nowhere to be found in Proverbs.[8]

Clearly the focus of the sages is ethical throughout. Still, since Proverbs' intention is not to provide a catalog of virtues it can be a helpful exercise to attempt to systematize, at least in a limited fashion, the core values upheld in the text.

The fundamental content of wisdom, as mentioned in Chapter One, is revealed in the prologue (1:1–7). The recipients of these proverbs receive training in "righteousness, justice, and equity" (v. 3). These are wisdom's archetypal virtues. After Woman Wisdom invites youth to a feast that will serve up these virtues (chaps. 8–9), the youth are treated to the main menu, the dense thicket of individual proverbs that follow in chapters 10–29. These proverbs flesh out the content of Woman Wisdom's teachings.

Significantly, clustered at the beginning of the sentence literature is a series of proverbs describing the paths of the righteous and the wicked (chaps. 10–11). Righteousness and wickedness are relational terms. On the one hand, the wicked are those who advantage self at the expense of disadvantaging others. On the other hand, the righteous are those who

7. See chapter 8 for a fuller development of his approach to Proverbs.
8. Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, 176.

disadvantage self for the sake of advantaging others. The sayings that follow specify what the way of righteousness involves.[9] Righteousness has to do with treating others in community with love and loyalty. More concretely, righteousness encompasses such virtues as self-control, patience, diligence, etc. To a degree, "righteousness" overlaps in meaning with the quality of "wisdom." The righteous person knows how to live responsibly before others and before God.

Below is an attempt to itemize qualities of righteousness addressed in the sentence literature. Though by no means comprehensive this ethical inventory is intended to identify some of the most prominent virtues taught by the sages:

- Self-control (13:3; 14:16, 29; 15:18; 16:32; 17:27–28; 18:13; 19:11, 19; 20:3; 21:23; 23:4–5; 25:28; 29:11)
- Humility (11:2; 12:9; 15:33; 16:19; 18:12; 22:4; 27:1; 29:23)
- Patience (12:16; 14:29; 15:1, 18; 19:11; 25:15)
- Diligence (10:4; 12:11, 24; 13:24; 14:4; 21:5; 27:23–27; 28:19)
- Integrity (11:3; 14:25, 32; 19:1; 20:7)
- Prudence (1:4; 3:5–8; 14:8; 15:5, 21; 19:14;
- Faithfulness (16:6; 17:17; 18:24; 19:22; 20:6; 25:19; 27:6, 10; 28:20)
- Generosity (11:24, 25; 14:21, 31; 19:6, 17; 21:26; 22:9; 28:27)
- Cheerfulness (14: 30; 15:13, 15, 23; 16:24; 17:22; 21:15; 29:18)
- Love (10:12; 15:17; 17:9)
- Love Enemies (24:17–18, 29; 25:21–22)
- Contentment (13:11; 14:30; 15:17; 16:19; 17:1; 25:16, 27; 27:1; 30:7–9)
- Considerateness (17:13; 20:22; 24:17–18; 24:29; 25:21–22)
- Compassion (12:10)
- Courage (22:13; 24:10; 26:13; 28:1)
- Curiosity (27:20)
- Appropriateness (15:23; 17:7; 25:11–12; 26:4–5)

9. The largest number of sayings in chs. 10–29 on any single topic deal with the righteous and the wicked. John Goldingay has discovered that the righteous/wicked sayings cluster at the beginning of chapters 10–22. In 10:1–11:13, forms of the root for righteous (צָדַק) appear nineteen times and for wicked (רָשַׁע) appear eighteen times. He concludes that the concentration of righteous/wicked sayings at the beginning of the unit establishes an ethical context for chapters 10–22. Goldingay, "The Arrangement of Sayings in Proverbs 10–15."

- Trust (16:1, 3, 9, 20; 17:3; 18:10; 19:21; 20:24; 21:30–31; 27:1)
- Reputation (22:1; 10:7; 12:8; 21:21; 11:16; 27:21)
- Friendship (3:3–4; 3:27–29; 14:20–21; 16:7; 17:9, 17; 18:24; 19:6–7; 25:17; 27:5, 6, 9, 10, 17)
- Industriousness (10:4,5; 13:4; 14:23; 22:29; 24:27)
- Respect for poor and parents (14:31; 17:5; 19:17; 21:13; 22:2; 22:16; 28:27; 29:13–14; 31:20; 10:1; 15:20; 19:26; 20:20; 23:22; 28:24)
- Virtues of Speech:
- Restraint (10:19; 11:12; 12:16, 23; 13:3; 17:27; 29:20)
- Healing (12:18; 16:24)
- Gentle (15:1, 4; 25:15)
- Gracious (25:11; 15:2; 16:21, 23; 22:11)
- Prudent (10:13; 10:20)

The sages sought to instill these virtues in the lives and thoughts of youthful minds. Each of the above are important virtues worthy of further investigation. There is no systematized way in which Proverbs prioritizes these virtues. So the reader must take care in assigning priority where none has been assigned, even though it is true that some virtues appear with more frequency than others.

Highlighting a selection of these virtues may serve as a way of briefly unpacking the content of what they reveal. For example, the sages valued the virtue of self-control and its close associate, restraint.[10] That the sages express a concern for developing self-control, indicates their understanding of "the enormous power of passion, whether expressing itself as fear, anxiety, anger, or lust."[11] Wisdom views self-control as essential for a person to live a productive life in community. The following proverb is representative:

> Like a city breached, without walls,
> is one who lacks self-control. (25:28)

10. James Crenshaw singles out "the virtues of self-control, restraint, eloquence, and honesty" as those on which the sages focused. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel*, 2. In a later chapter Crenshaw identifies four other virtues that seem to overlap the four mentioned here: "Both in Egypt and in Israel, four character traits distinguish wise from foolish, good from evil: silence, eloquence, timeliness, and modesty" (71). By silence he means the control of anger, lust, greed, and envy.

11. Ibid., 2.

The first line of this comparative proverb[12] contains an analogy; the second line the subject or referent. The external defense of a walled city is compared to the internal defense of self-control that humans possess. Lack of self-restraint leaves one vulnerable to emotions and desires that wage war within. Self-control enables a person to hold those desires in check and channel them for productive use.

Individuals must exercise restraint in every facet of life. For example, one must restrain sexual passions:

> My child, give me your heart,
> and let your eyes observe my ways.
> For a prostitute is a deep pit;
> an adulteress is a narrow well.
> She lies in wait like a robber
> and increases the number of the faithless. (23:26–28; cf., 21:17; 29:3)

The sage also emphasized the restraint of anger:

> One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty,
> and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city. (16:32)

This better-than proverb[13] makes a contrast between an internal quality and an external possession. The proverb teaches that private conquest of self is more valuable than public conquest of a city. The person who controls the self accomplishes more than the one who controls others (cf., 14:29; 15:18; 19:11; 29:11).

Not only must an individual control feelings of anger but also the use of speech, as the following proverb observes:

> When words are many, transgression is not lacking,
> but the prudent are restrained in speech. (10:19)

The one who incessantly talks is the one who inevitably gets into trouble. A contemporary proverb expresses the thought succinctly when it announces, "least said, sooner mended." Because such individuals are so busy talking, they are not sensitive to the situation or the individuals around them (cf., 12:16; 13:3; 15:28; 17:27–28; 18:2, 13, 21; 21:23). Restraint is thus critical in every aspect of life, not only sexual passions, anger, and speech, but also

12. A comparative or analogic proverb is one in which one line contains a concrete analogy that illuminates a more abstract thought in the second line. A whole series of analogic proverbs are collected in chapters 25–27.

13. See chapter 7 for an explanation of better-than sayings.

decision-making (15:28; 18:13, 17; 20:25), sleep (20:13; 24:30–34), appetite (23:20–21), and thoughts (13:16).

Another important virtue the sages' teach is generosity. The wise show generosity to all people (11:24–26) and in so doing inspire others to generosity (11:25). A wise person expresses generosity especially to those who are poor (14:21). How one treats the poor reflects one's relationship to and respect for God (19:17; 14:31; 17:5). Proverbs 22:9 offers a succinct perspective on this virtue:

> Those who are generous are blessed,
> for they share their bread with the poor.

The phrase "those who are generous" in Hebrew literally reads "a good eye." The ability to see others with compassion leads to expressions of generosity. For the sage, the opposite of the one with "a good eye" is the person with " a bad eye" (23:6; 28:22). This stingy, avaricious person has blurred vision that affects his or her ability to share with others.

Proverbs 21:25–26 contrasts the greedy with the generous person:

> The craving of the lazy person is fatal,
> for lazy hands refuse to labor.
> All day long the wicked covet,
> but the righteous give and do not hold back.

Here the wicked and the lazy person are one and the same. They are the ones who continually crave for more. Thus a sharp contrast is set up between the greedy and the generous. The righteous ones demonstrate their righteousness through unselfish behavior.

It may be helpful to highlight one more virtue. The sage holds kindness (or considerateness), especially towards those who would not reciprocate, in high regard. In an uncommon use of the imperative, Proverbs 20:22 directs, "Do not say, 'I will repay evil'; wait for the LORD, and he will help you." The proverb calls on one to suspend the desire to seek revenge. God will deal with the issue in God's own time and own way. The proverb calls on individuals to exercise patience, trust, and spiritual maturity as they face the injustices of life.

The most well known proverb that speaks of kindness in response to an enemy is 25:21–22:

> If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat;
> and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink;
> for you will heap coals of fire on their heads,
> and the LORD will reward you.

The saying imagines an occasion when the enemy is vulnerable—hungry or thirsty. On the occasion when it is easiest and most tempting to get back at the one who hates you, you are to do the opposite of what your natural instincts call on you to do. Demonstrate acts of kindness, giving the opponent bread and water. The burning or fiery coals may represent the red-faced humiliation of the enemy.[14] Thus the enemy is brought to shame. The admonition is to practice doing good to those who treat you as an enemy.

Self-control, generosity, and kindness represent just of few of wisdom's virtues. Exploring their meaning can help generate deeper understanding and appreciation for them. The most important step, however, is to embody them in life.

WISDOM'S VICES

It is instructive also to look at the counter side of the virtues and identify some of the vices of wisdom. Students can better understand the virtues by identifying the flaws. As with the list of virtues, this list of vices is not exhaustive, but it does give a fairly representative sample:

- Pride (11:2; 13:10; 15:25; 16:5, 18, 19; 21:4; 26:12; 29:23; 30:32–33)
- Haste (13:11; 19:2; 20:21; 21:5; 28:20; 29:20)
- Laziness (18:9; 19:15; 20:4; 24:30–34; 26:13–16)
- Jealousy (14:30; 24:19–20; 27:4)
- Greed (15:27; 21:26; 22:16; 28:3, 22, 25)
- Insensitivity/Inappropriateness (25:20; 26:7, 9; 27:14)
- Anxiety (12:25; 17:22)
- Gluttony (23:20–21; 25:16; 28:7)
- Falsehood (10:2; 11:1; 16:11; 20:10, 23; 20:17; 21:6; 22:28)
- Vices of Speech:
  - bragging (25:14)
  - talkativeness (10:19)
  - gossip (11:13; 16:28; 17:9; 20:19; 18:8; 26:20)
  - quarreling (16:28; 17:1, 14, 19; 18:19; 20:3; 21:9; 22:10; 26:20, 21; 27:15)

14. Some would argue that the image of burning coals is a reference to seeking revenge. Given the number of proverbs that admonish a person not to seek revenge, this interpretation is difficult to accept.

- lying (10:18; 12:17, 19, 22; 14:5; 17:4)
- flattery (26:28; 28:23;29:5)
- slander (10:18; 11:9; 18:8; 19:5, 9, 28)

As with the virtues, let me isolate a selection of these vices. For example, as a flaw pride is one of the most basic sins of humanity. Proverbs 13:10 serves as one example:

> By insolence the heedless make strife,
> but wisdom is with those who take advice.

The proverb implies that the main product pride produces is strife. So one vice leads to another. In the second line wisdom stands in contrast with insolence or pride. Where the prideful person develops contempt for others' opinions, wisdom gladly receives counsel. Another proverb describes the fault this way:

> When pride comes, then comes disgrace;
> but wisdom is with the humble. (11:2)

In Proverbs, pride is the fundamental sin of the fool. Humility is the fundamental virtue of the wise. The sages would heartily agree that "pride goes before a fall" (16:18).

Haste is another example of a vice, one that stands counter to the virtue of self-control. The following saying epitomizes the instruction:

> Desire without knowledge is not good,
> and one who moves too hurriedly misses the way. (19:2)

This proverb declares the inappropriateness of "desire" or passion without knowledge. Enthusiasm must ground itself in reflective thought. Otherwise one engages in activism with no reality base. Such a person is like chaff blown about by the wind (Ps. 1:4). Enthusiasm without understanding easily becomes misguided. Line two intensifies the first line: "one who moves too hurriedly misses the way" literally the Hebrew text reads, "feet that hasten, miss the mark." Haste is highly suspect in wisdom's list of vices. The two lines of this proverb compliment each other. Line one speaks of the inner desires and thoughts. Line two speaks of the outer actions (the "feet"). When internal desires and external actions are not restrained by reflective thought (wisdom), they will not achieve their goals.

One final vice to look at is jealousy. The following proverb describes the physical consequences of jealousy:

A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh,
but passion makes the bones rot. (14:30)

According to this proverb, one's mental state influences one's physical health. A healthy mind brings healing to the whole body. By contrast, uncontrolled passions can destroy the body as quickly as a deadly disease. The wise understood the human being holistically. Thoughts and feelings affect the physical state.

Consider another proverb:

Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming,
but who is able to stand before jealousy?" (27:4)

The proverb moves from the harsh emotions of wrath and anger to that which is worse, jealousy! Clearly, anger is harmful, but jealousy serves as its catalyst (cf., 6:34). Jealousy erodes the moral and spiritual fiber of an individual; in the language of 14:30, it rots the bones.

The above are a few representatives of the vices that wisdom opposes. I have at least tried to unpack a partial dimension of their meaning. Looking at both catalogs of virtues and vices can help shed light on the other. It brings a clearer picture of the type of character the sage wishes to develop.

In teaching wisdom's virtues and folly's vices today, part of the education process includes discovering, defining, explaining, and imaging what those qualities look like in the contemporary world. In addition, in keeping with the tradition of wisdom, the education process involves seeing them embodied. Wisdom has as part of its educational philosophy the living out of these virtues. Education, in the world of the sages, is existential and not primarily academic. Wisdom cultivates virtue not merely by engaging the mind but by engaging the whole person in the pursuit of character.

Wisdom calls on families and faith communities to identify the moral values central to the well-being of the community. In the process of naming those values and embodying them in daily life, the faith community develops a clearer understanding of its identity and responsibility. To do this, it is sometimes helpful to look at contemporary resources from other academic disciplines. Such a fresh perspective can provide insight into the virtues found in Proverbs. It can also assist one in incorporating those virtues in contemporary life. With that in mind, the next section will put the virtues described in Proverbs in dialogue with a contemporary model of virtues.