

31 Days of Blended Family Wisdom from Proverbs

By Joel W. Hawbaker

Introduction

The book of Proverbs has provided guidance, wisdom, and inspiration for generations and generations of people all over the world. The words contained in Proverbs have helped shape lives, save marriages, guide personal decisions, and build character. There are large, shaping principles as well as small, very specific tips for practical living. Throughout the book we are reminded of themes such as pursuing wisdom, practicing righteousness, and striving for justice.

These themes and principles are just as applicable to us today as they have ever been, and for those of us in complex blended families, they are even more important. It's difficult to know exactly what it means to "pursue wisdom" in a nuclear family; it's even more complex to know what that means in a family unit that is spread over multiple homes and a variety of parents.

A large part of my life now is working with other adults who are in blended families, step-families, and coparenting situations. My goal is to help them to live more cooperatively and positively so that they can be the best families possible, regardless of the specifics of their unique situations. All of my work is based on two key Biblical principles:

- 1) **Be the adult you want your children to become.** As parents we are called to be examples to our children, and this is especially important in complex home situations.
- 2) **Remember the Golden Rule: treat others as you want to be treated.** This is easy to say and tremendously difficult to do, especially in situations that contain much hurt, pain, bitterness, and other negative emotions. We have to be willing to forgive, and we must be willing to act out of that forgiveness rather than our negative emotions. Only then can we truly follow Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:12: "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." (ESV)

This devotional is written to help encourage and inspire you in your blended family journey, to help you learn more about the importance of wisdom, prudence, patience, gentleness, righteousness, and love in the midst of difficult and complicated situations. My goal is that it will help you and encourage you both now and in the future. May God

continue to bless you and your family as you pursue His will in all areas of your life, starting at home.

Walk worthy,

Joel W. Hawbaker

Day 1

Proverbs 1:1-7

The Beginning of Knowledge

- 1 The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:
- 2 To know wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight,
- 3 to receive instruction in wise dealing,
in righteousness, justice, and equity;
- 4 to give prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the youth—
- 5 Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance,
- 6 to understand a proverb and a saying,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
- 7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

In order to make blended family life work successfully, you'll need every bit of these verses. You'll need wisdom, instruction, insight, righteousness, equity, prudence, knowledge, understanding, and discretion. Most importantly, you'll need "the fear of the Lord," because without it, we're relying on ourselves, and that's never a good idea.

I don't know the specific path you took to becoming part of a blended family. Perhaps you lost a loved one and have remarried, though you still carry the pain and loss from the past. Perhaps you and a previous partner amicably parted ways but are still united through your children. Perhaps you made a mistake that cost you a previous marriage, and you struggle with guilt and shame from the past. Perhaps you were wronged by a former spouse and you're carrying with you the anger and bitterness that comes with feeling betrayed by someone you loved. Perhaps you married someone who has been through one or more of these situations, and you're just learning about how complex their emotions are due to their experiences in previous relationships.

Whatever your story is, you can be sure of a few things: first, your story is unique. No two blended family stories are exactly the same, nor will yours stay the same: you, your spouse, and the children will continue to grow older, and that changes the equation. Second, your story and past do not have to shape your future. They will influence it, certainly, but they do not have to define it. And finally, you can be sure that God loves you and your family. Regardless of how you got here, what you've done, or what you've

been through, Jesus died for you in order to reconcile you to our Father above. No matter what struggles you've faced in your family's past, God's grace is sufficient. So, take heart today, and ask God to give you what you need in order to be the best you can be for your blended family.

Prayer: Our Father, you know my past and my struggles; you know my pain and my heartache; you also know that I want to live for you. Please give me wisdom, instruction, insight, righteousness, equity, prudence, knowledge, understanding, and discretion as I learn how to serve you more through my family. Thank you that your grace is sufficient for me and for us. Please forgive me of my sins and help me to live more for you today than I ever have before. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 2

Proverbs 2:1-5

The Value of Wisdom

- 1 My son, if you receive my words
and treasure up my commandments with you,
- 2 making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
- 3 yes, if you call out for insight
and raise your voice for understanding,
- 4 if you seek it like silver
and search for it as for hidden treasures,
- 5 then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.

Most Christians are familiar with stories of Solomon's wisdom, including when he decided the best way to determine the true mother of a child was to 'threaten' to cut the child in half. What we may not be as familiar with is that wisdom is also going to be necessary for us to navigate the difficult and sometimes turbulent waters of blended family life. Former spouses, complex adult-child relationships, old hurts...all of these can crop up to cause problems at any moment, and it will take the wisdom of God, even beyond the wisdom of Solomon, for us to live this life well.

In the passage, God is addressing us as sons and reminding us that He is faithful to give us what we need, and not just in a material sense. In a very real way, God is calling us to approach him the way that we want our children to approach us.

There's a phrase that many of us are familiar with, having heard it from parents, coaches, and teachers growing up, that has to do with working for things we want: "Anything worth having is worth working for." In our complex blended family situations, we need to be pursuing a relationship with God, and that means putting in the work of a relationship. If you look at the action words in the above passage, you quickly get the sense that this relationship is not just one of intellectual acceptance, but rather it is a relationship of active doing, both physical and cognitive. Verbs such as receive, treasure, incline, call out, seek, and search call us to pursue God and trust in Him to deliver what He has promised, namely Himself.

God doesn't guarantee us treasure; rather, He wants us to treasure up His commandments.

God doesn't guarantee us comfort; rather, He wants us to take comfort in His wisdom, understanding, and insight.

God doesn't promise us riches; rather, he wants us to seek His wisdom as if it were silver and hidden treasures.

And when we do those things, we will "understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God." What better way could there be to help our blended families than to actively pursue the fear, knowledge, and wisdom of God?

Prayer: Almighty God, thank you for reminding us that You have all the wisdom, knowledge, and riches that we need. Help us to pursue you the way we often pursue worldly treasure, and forgive us when we don't. Give us the wisdom we need today to make good decisions for our family, and help us to seek to honor you more fully in our relationships with others. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 3

Proverbs 3:1-8

Trust In the Lord With All Your Heart

- 1 My son, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments,
- 2 for length of days and years of life
and peace they will add to you.
- 3 Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck;
write them on the tablet of your heart.
- 4 So you will find favor and good success
in the sight of God and man.
- 5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
- 6 In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
- 7 Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.
- 8 It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones.

Verse 5 is one of the most familiar and quoted verses in the entire Bible, reminding us how we need to trust not in ourselves but in our God and in His understanding. That was true for us when we were young and when we were single. How much more true is it now that we're older and part of a complex family system? We may not often think of ourselves as "wise in our own eyes," but we often act that way, to our detriment.

This passage hits on major themes for all of us in blended families, such as love, faithfulness, life, and wisdom. All of these begin with what we read yesterday about knowing God and following his word.

In a blended family, we are often in need of refreshment and replenishment of our spirit. Past hurts, bitterness, anger, resentment, and present frustration often sap us of energy and happiness. We get angry at our ex, or we get irritable with our children, or we're frustrated at the complexities and inconvenience of the schedule; perhaps we're just frustrated with where we are in life in general.

It's incumbent upon parents to remember to seek God in the midst of these types of frustrations. Verse 5 is one of the most quoted verses of the Bible, and it is a reminder to all of us that we need God more than we realize. However, if we read all the way through verse 8, we see that this is not just about needing God. Rather, it's about the

fact that when we acknowledge our need for him, and when we pursue Him, He will grant us the healing and refreshment that we need.

To “fear the Lord, and turn away from evil” is a succinct description of the life we are called to lead. And when we do this, God’s word says that He will heal and refresh us. Does that mean we won’t ever get sick if we read our Bible every day? Of course not. But it does mean that when we are consistently pursuing God, the frailties of our flesh and the frustrations of our spirit won’t be so overwhelming.

When we rely on God to guide us in our decision making and to give us wisdom to navigate the complexities of multiple households and varying agendas, He promises to give us the peace we need. When we gather together at church, with our friends, and with our family, we have opportunities to share that peace with them as well.

Prayer: Father, thank you for reminding us of our need for you, and help us to acknowledge that need for you in every area of our lives. Give us the wisdom we need to make good decisions, and please forgive us when we rely on our own understanding. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Day 4

Proverbs 4:1-9

A Father’s Wise Instruction

- 1 Hear, O sons, a father's instruction,
and be attentive, that you may gain insight,
- 2 for I give you good precepts;
do not forsake my teaching.
- 3 When I was a son with my father,
tender, the only one in the sight of my mother,
- 4 he taught me and said to me,
“Let your heart hold fast my words;
keep my commandments, and live.
- 5 Get wisdom; get insight;
do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth.
- 6 Do not forsake her, and she will keep you;

love her, and she will guard you.

7 The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,
and whatever you get, get insight.

8 Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;
she will honor you if you embrace her.

9 She will place on your head a graceful garland;
she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.”

This passage reminds us that God wants and desires to grant us wisdom and insight, just as we want to provide that for our children. He is faithful to His word, and our task is to be obedient to it as we set an example for our blended families.

When our children were young, we often had to remind them of the same things over and over: “Wash your hands after you use the bathroom,” or “Put your toys away after you’re done with them” or “Be nice to your sister!” Here, God is reminding us to pursue wisdom yet again, just as we had to remind our children over and over about how we wanted them to behave. He tells us to hear, to be attentive, to hold fast, to keep, to get wisdom, and not to forsake her. He is reminding us because we so quickly forget, and he is reminding us so that we will remember. And as a bonus, in the last two verses here, He tells us the benefits of pursuing and holding fast to wisdom: we are told that wisdom will “exalt you”, she will “honor you”, she will give you “a graceful garland” and “a beautiful crown.”

What does it look like for blended families to have “a graceful garland” or “a beautiful crown”? Truthfully, I have no idea! But I do know that if it’s from God, it’s going to be better than any alternative, and I also know that it’s worth pursuing.

God delights to give us wisdom, and He commands us to hold fast to it. But this is not just an instruction for its own sake; rather, it is an instruction for our own good. When we do this, God will reward us, just as we rewarded our children when they followed instructions. In the difficulties of blended family life, we need all the wisdom of God to make good decisions, and then we can enjoy the rewards of peace and joy even if the day-to-day is still difficult and complicated.

Prayer: God, thank you for being a God who loves us enough to tell us how you want us to live and then rewards us for doing so. Help us to pursue wisdom through your word consistently and continually, and let us use that wisdom for furthering your kingdom, beginning in our own homes. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Day 5

Proverbs 5:1-6

Warning Against Adultery

- 1 My son, be attentive to my wisdom;
incline your ear to my understanding,
- 2 that you may keep discretion,
and your lips may guard knowledge.
- 3 For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey,
and her speech is smoother than oil,
- 4 but in the end she is bitter as wormwood,
sharp as a two-edged sword.
- 5 Her feet go down to death;
her steps follow the path to Sheol;
- 6 she does not ponder the path of life;
her ways wander, and she does not know it.

My favorite author is J.R.R. Tolkien, the writer of *The Lord of the Rings*, and in that book, there is a passage that my family quotes often: “The burned hand teaches best; after that, advice about fire goes to the heart.” It reveals that, as sinful humans, we often have to experience painful consequences for ourselves before we are willing to listen to the wisdom and teachings of others.

In Proverbs 5, we really start to understand how hard-headed we must be, because here God reminds us again (again!) to listen to wisdom, and then he gives us a specific warning about temptation and the deadly results of sin.

There are many blended families that are the result of at least one divorced person getting remarried, and many of those divorces are due to infidelity on the part of one or both partners in a previous marriage. Thus, many individuals know all too well the truth of this proverb and the painful, life-changing consequences of marital unfaithfulness.

In our day, when instant access to anyone in the world is available, and temptation is more present than ever before, a wise blended family spouse will beware temptation and take necessary steps to minimize and avoid it. If you have experienced

unfaithfulness, you know the depth of the pain and bitterness it causes. If you have been guilty of it, you may still struggle with the feelings of shame associated with your past. In all of these situations, there is good news: God's grace is big enough to overcome both your pain and your shame!

The truth is, we're all guilty of unfaithfulness in some way: unfaithfulness to God and unfaithfulness to our spouse (in our mind, if not in our actions). This passage, then, is a warning against adultery specifically, but it is also a general warning about the dangers of turning away from God and being unfaithful to His word. As C.S. Lewis writes in *The Great Divorce*, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'" Let us commit today to being faithful to God, to saying, "Thy will be done," rather than insisting on our own way.

Prayer:

Our Father, help us to be faithful to you and to our spouse in thought, word, and deed. Give us the wisdom to know when we need to flee from temptation, and give us the strength to do so, especially when the temptation seems so innocent. Help us to truthfully desire to say, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done," and help us to mean it. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 6

Proverbs 6:1-5

Practical Warnings

- 1 My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor,
have given your pledge for a stranger,
- 2 if you are snared in the words of your mouth,
caught in the words of your mouth,
- 3 then do this, my son, and save yourself,
for you have come into the hand of your neighbor:
go, hasten, and plead urgently with your neighbor.
- 4 Give your eyes no sleep
and your eyelids no slumber;
- 5 save yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter,

like a bird from the hand of the fowler.

Have you ever experienced the joy of being reunited with someone or something that you'd thought was lost? A friend you haven't seen in a long time, or a beloved family heirloom that was revealed when cleaning out the attic? Or perhaps you know the thrill of coming across an old love letter from your spouse, or an encouraging note from a parent that has passed away. These are a glimpse or shadow of what the Bible calls reconciliation, the putting right of things that have gone wrong in the world.

In these verses, we are instructed to carry out the Christian task of reconciliation, especially when we are the party that has wronged another. In our blended families, the task of reconciliation is on-going and never-ending, both within our own home and between homes. Relationships are always complex and changing, and we need to be sensitive to those dynamics in the midst of our day-to-day lives.

Without God's help, it will be impossible for us to solve all of the frustrations from past relationships, and we certainly won't be able to solve them all at one time. Pain from divorce, bitterness of parenting disagreements, anger at an ex, confusion about child-rearing across multiple homes; all of these crop up at unexpected moments. When they do, we need to revisit these verses and be reminded that one of the tasks of the Christian is to seek to heal broken and difficult relationships, as far as that is within our power.

Reconciliation doesn't necessarily mean getting back together with your ex, but it does mean learning to co-parent with them in a way that reflects the Gospel. It means being encouraging about them to your children. It means being willing to admit when we do things wrong, even when we're the only ones admitting any wrongdoing. God has called us to honor Him and to follow the teachings in His word, regardless of what anyone else is doing. This is difficult, but it is ultimately the right thing to do, and when we do it, everyone will be better off in the long run.

Doing our part in reconciliation allows us to begin the difficult work of forgiveness, which frees us from bitterness and pain and regret. It also sets a powerful example for our children. When they see the adults in their lives working together for their good, they see that they are loved by their earthly parents as well as by our Heavenly Father.

Prayer: Father God, thank you that you sent Jesus so that we could be reconciled to you, and thank you for calling us to also participate in the work of reconciliation here on earth. Give us wisdom to know how to go about it, and give us the strength to do the

difficult work necessary. Please forgive us when we fail, and help us to become more like you each day. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 7

Proverbs 7:1-5

Warning Against the Adulteress

- 1 My son, keep my words
and treasure up my commandments with you;
- 2 keep my commandments and live;
keep my teaching as the apple of your eye;
- 3 bind them on your fingers;
write them on the tablet of your heart.
- 4 Say to wisdom, "You are my sister,"
and call insight your intimate friend,
- 5 to keep you from the forbidden woman,
from the adulteress with her smooth words.

How frustrated might we be with someone if we had to remind them about the same issue six times in seven days? Or perhaps we're not frustrated; we're just not sure that they get it. Six out of the first seven Proverbs began with an instruction or reminder to keep commandments and pursue wisdom. God must really want us to get it!

Two of the last three days have also included a warning about the dangers of temptation, specifically the dangers of the adulteress. God doesn't deal in accidents or coincidences, so if the Bible repeats something, let us have enough wisdom to pay close attention.

Every blended family is borne from some type of pain: pain of loss, pain of betrayal, pain from indifference, pain of suffering, and the list could go on. Many have personal experience with the consequences of giving in to temptations: end of a marriage, reduced time with children, expenses of divorce and moving, and many more. God repeats his command to us to pursue wisdom *as a way of* avoiding temptation as well. Unlike some of the ancient Greeks, we are not called to pursue wisdom for its own sake, though there may be some value in that.

We are called to pursue wisdom for many reasons, one of which is to help us avoid temptation, often by literally fleeing from it or separating ourselves from it. If I'm tempted to gluttony, then hanging out at an all-you-can-eat buffet is not my smartest move. Sure, my willpower may allow me to resist for the length of a meal, or even a couple. But eventually, I'm likely to break and give in. The same is true with any temptation: continual exposure to it increases the chances that we will succumb.

As we reach the end of this week of devotionals, let's review what God has shown us:

- The value and importance of pursuing Godly wisdom
- The necessity and action of prayer in acquiring wisdom by asking God for it
- The dangers of temptation and the pursuit of wisdom as an aid in resisting and fleeing it

As a schoolteacher, I often ask students questions such as, "Ok, so what does this teach us?" or "What have we learned from this?" So, I would ask you, my friends, the same questions. What have you learned, and how can you apply it this week in your blended family?

Prayer: Father God, increase our faith and our desire to grow more like you. Help us to love your wisdom and mercy, and give us the strength to show that to others, even and especially when it's difficult. Please forgive us of our sins, and help us to turn away from them. Continue to teach us your wisdom and cause us to love your wisdom more than our own. Finally, Lord, please bless us as we seek to honor you in our families. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 8

Proverbs 8:1-11

The Blessing of Wisdom

1 Does not wisdom call?

Does not understanding raise her voice?

2 On the heights beside the way,

at the crossroads she takes her stand;

3 beside the gates in front of the town,

at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud:
4 "To you, O men, I call,
and my cry is to the children of man.
5 O simple ones, learn prudence;
O fools, learn sense.
6 Hear, for I will speak noble things,
and from my lips will come what is right,
7 for my mouth will utter truth;
wickedness is an abomination to my lips.
8 All the words of my mouth are righteous;
there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.
9 They are all straight to him who understands,
and right to those who find knowledge.
10 Take my instruction instead of silver,
and knowledge rather than choice gold,
11 for wisdom is better than jewels,
and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

When I was a teenager attending youth group, we used to sing the following words in a praise song on what felt like a weekly basis:

*Oh Lord, you are more precious than silver.
Lord, you are more costly than gold.
Lord, you are more beautiful than diamonds,
and nothing I desire compares with you.*

Each time I read this passage in Proverbs, I'm reminded of that song and those lyrics. And though I used to sometimes tire of singing them, that only reveals that I didn't yet fully grasp what may sound trite, but is still entirely true: what God has to offer us is far beyond anything this earth has to offer.

Week 2 of our Blended Family devotional begins with a personification of wisdom calling to us and reminding us why we should listen. Here, again, God is showing us just how vital wisdom is. The last two verses especially are a reminder that all true wisdom is God's wisdom, and it has worth far beyond silver, gold, and jewels.

In the complexities of blended family life, wisdom will make or break us: scheduling headaches, clothing choices as the kids get older, what to do

about cellphones and social media access, conversations with our kids about our past; we need God's wisdom to navigate these potentially treacherous waters.

God's wisdom is calling to us and inviting us to hear, to learn, and to understand. God's wisdom needs to be the source of our instruction, our knowledge, and our wisdom for our families. It is easy to trust in our own experiences, but God invites us to learn from Him instead. There are plenty of bad examples of blended families to learn from, and there are plenty of our experiences that aren't necessarily going to help us move forward. There is only one source of wisdom that will lead our blended families home.

Prayer: God, thank you for not only giving us your wisdom, but for actively and continually calling us back to you to hear and to learn. Please give us the humility we need to be willing to listen, and give us the strength to do what you teach us. Help us be the leaders our families need us to be, by relying on your strength and wisdom. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 9

Proverbs 9:1-6

The Way of Wisdom

- 1 Wisdom has built her house;
she has hewn her seven pillars.
- 2 She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine;
she has also set her table.
- 3 She has sent out her young women to call
from the highest places in the town,
- 4 "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!"
To him who lacks sense she says,
- 5 "Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
- 6 Leave your simple ways, and live,
and walk in the way of insight."

When I was younger, I was a construction worker for a couple of years, helping build houses in my hometown. I wasn't very good at it, and I didn't like it very much, but it taught me a valuable lesson: building a house is a lot more complicated and takes a lot more knowledge, skill, and wisdom than I had realized! I've never hewn pillars or slaughtered beasts, or even mixed wine (though I also was a bartender many years ago). As with anything, each of these tasks is more complex than might first appear, and all require wisdom.

As we've seen before, God doesn't repeat things by accident or because He forgot that something has already been discussed. Rather, God repeats things that we need to hear repeatedly. In this passage we get a second personification of wisdom, and this one is even more forceful than the first.

Wisdom is powerful, able to build and to hew pillars, to slaughter beasts and prepare a feast. We, then, are the ones invited to the feast prepared by wisdom, and we are invited to forsake our past, our mistakes, and our "simple" lives to pursue Him instead.

The writer of Proverbs here is encouraging us to leave in order to live: we are to leave behind our old feelings of anger and bitterness, our old habits of selfish decision-making and self-destructive actions. And in doing so, God invites us to live in a way that will take our blended families in a new Christ-centered direction, a life of "insight" and wisdom.

How subtle a shift in sound and how profound a shift in meaning: leave and live. Live and learn.

Prayer: God of wisdom, thank you for continuing to pursue us through our stubbornness, and for continuing to call us to listen. Thank you for inviting us to a feast beyond our imagination. Help us to leave our old ways in order to live the way you have called us to live, and give us the wisdom to make good decisions for our family. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 10

Proverbs 10:1-5

The Proverbs of Solomon

- 1 A wise son makes a glad father,
but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.
- 2 Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit,
but righteousness delivers from death.
- 3 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.
- 5 He who gathers in summer is a prudent son,
but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame.

Ben Franklin is credited with writing many helpful sayings in his *Poor Richard's Almanack* back in the 18th century. We're familiar with sayings such as, 'Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.' Or maybe you've heard, 'There are no gains without pain.' These are great and useful, but they're not exactly God's wisdom.

After almost a week and a half, we finally get into what we think of when we hear the word "proverbs": helpful sayings or guiding principles for living. This means that God has spent over a week preparing our hearts to listen, to hear, to learn, and to grow. We will continue to receive reminders to do those things, and now we also begin to learn some of the specifics that God is calling us to understand.

Verse 1 is another, though subtler, reminder about the important role that wisdom plays in our lives, while verses 2-5 each contain wisdom as explained through contrast: wickedness vs. righteousness, laziness vs. diligence, harvest vs. slumber.

For many years, we read a chapter of Proverbs with our daughters each evening at bedtime, and after a while we could quote many of them. Sometimes it was awkward to explain some of the sayings to young girls, but we believe that it was important to read God's word as God's word. Now that our girls are both teenagers, and since they don't share a bedroom anymore, we no longer read Proverbs at bedtime, though perhaps their

teenage years would be a better time than ever to be repeatedly studying God's wisdom!

As our blended families grow and our children get older, these principles certainly become more important, rather than less: righteousness (vs 2), God's provision for us (vs 3), hard work (vs 4 and 5). It's also good to remember that these principles ought to be central to our Christian walk as well, and not just sayings to be taught to our children.

Prayer: God, as our kids get older, help us to live out your principles ever more faithfully. Help us to pursue righteousness, to work hard for the sake of the Gospel, and to be grateful for your provisions for our families. Please forgive us when we act foolishly or give in to laziness. Give us the strength to follow you more closely now than ever before. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 11

Proverbs 11:1-8

- 1 A false balance is an abomination to the Lord,
but a just weight is his delight.
- 2 When pride comes, then comes disgrace,
but with the humble is wisdom.
- 3 The integrity of the upright guides them,
but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them.
- 4 Riches do not profit in the day of wrath,
but righteousness delivers from death.
- 5 The righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight,
but the wicked falls by his own wickedness.
- 6 The righteousness of the upright delivers them,
but the treacherous are taken captive by their lust.
- 7 When the wicked dies, his hope will perish,
and the expectation of wealth perishes too.
- 8 The righteous is delivered from trouble,
and the wicked walks into it instead.

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote about the four cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, prudence, and fortitude. These virtues were recognized throughout the ancient world as forming the basis for a well-lived life, and they had been written about by people such as the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius as well as church fathers like Augustine of Hippo.

The focus of this passage is on virtues, and each of these virtues is important to a successful blended family. These virtues include justice (vs 1), humility (vs 2), integrity (vs 3), and righteousness (vs 4-6, 8). While we often say we want justice, that's not as true as we might think, especially when we consider what justice might mean for us based on our mistakes. We want justice for ourselves when we've been wronged, but we hesitate when it comes to justice for others. That's one reason why righteousness is mentioned so much more often. Righteousness is necessary for all of the other virtues to have their full effect.

When you look at this list of virtues, ask yourselves what they would look like in your blended family. What would it be like to exercise humility, integrity, justice (for your ex as well as for yourself), and righteousness? What would it look like to relate to your children (both biological and/or stepchildren) based on integrity and righteousness, with humility, instead of only focusing on justice (or behavior)?

Think of the most recent conversation you've had with the other adults in your blended family. Did you approach it with humility, or did you approach it with pride? Were you looking to find the best solution to a problem, or were you looking to get your way? I will fully confess that many, many times I have failed in this regard. Thankfully, God continues to call us to righteousness, even when we've failed. He is faithful, and He forgives us when we ask Him to. He also promises to give us His wisdom when we ask Him to. So today, ask God to show you what it would look like for you to exercise and seek out justice, humility, and integrity, all beginning from a place of righteousness.

Prayer: Our Father, the only true and righteous judge, please forgive us when we want justice for ourselves more than we want justice for others. Help us instead to act with integrity and humility, help us to grow more righteous through our pursuit of your wisdom and knowledge. Grant us

greater wisdom each day so that we can lead our family closer to you. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 12

Proverbs 12:1-8

- 1 Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,
but he who hates reproof is stupid.
- 2 A good man obtains favor from the Lord,
but a man of evil devices he condemns.
- 3 No one is established by wickedness,
but the root of the righteous will never be moved.
- 4 An excellent wife is the crown of her husband,
but she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones.
- 5 The thoughts of the righteous are just;
the counsels of the wicked are deceitful.
- 6 The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood,
but the mouth of the upright delivers them.
- 7 The wicked are overthrown and are no more,
but the house of the righteous will stand.
- 8 A man is commended according to his good sense,
but one of twisted mind is despised.

Reproof is defined as "An expression of blame or disapproval," referring to someone pointing out when we've screwed up. As a high school teacher for fourteen years, part of my job has been to provide reproof and correction to my students whenever necessary. And I'll admit that I often got a bit too much joy out of quoting Proverbs 12:1 to them when they didn't like it. I'd say, "If you hate reproof, and you hate being called stupid, then you need to take that up with God." And then I'd feel very smug and superior. EPIC FACEPALM moment. It took literally years before I realized how arrogant, condescending, and simply sinful this was.

Following that eye-catching opening verse, this passage is a series of contrasts about wives, thoughts, words, and men. The focus is on helping us

properly understand ourselves, our actions, and our communication. These are also critical to a healthy blended family: if we don't understand ourselves, why we do what we do, and how we are supposed to communicate with our families, we're in for a very difficult journey.

Basically all of Proverbs is about reproof and correction in some way, and as a sinful person I'm very good at knowing how to use these verses to show others how they ought to behave. I have shared them with my daughters for years, but I often miss how I am supposed to be applying them within my own life, especially in regard to how I treat my family.

In fact, by not loving discipline and knowledge, by hating reproof, I set myself up for the failure of my first marriage. By ignoring counsel and wisdom shared by men who had been husbands for far longer than me, I caused my own problems. Thankfully, God has been merciful and given me a second chance to be a better husband.

If you're reading this, He's probably given you a chance you thought you might not get, whether that's as a husband or wife, as a father or mother. Whatever it is, let us strive together to be excellent wives, men of good sense, regardless of our pasts, and using our thoughts and words to build up our blended families.

Prayer: God, you are the perfect and heavenly father, who needs no reproof but who lovingly provides it to us. Thank you that you love us enough to not leave us as we are, and thank you that you call us to become something more. Please forgive us of our sins and our arrogance and even our stupidity, and help us to become the wives and husbands that you have called us to be. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 13

Proverbs 13:1-6

- 1 A wise son hears his father's instruction,
but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.
- 2 From the fruit of his mouth a man eats what is good,
but the desire of the treacherous is for violence.
- 3 Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life;

- he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.
- 4 The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing,
while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.
- 5 The righteous hates falsehood,
but the wicked brings shame and disgrace.
- 6 Righteousness guards him whose way is blameless,
but sin overthrows the wicked.

I remember being in grade school when another student played a trick on me. In front of others, they said, "The frog jumped into the lake! Get it?!" and then laughed as if that was the punchline to a joke, even though nothing had preceded it. Being a year younger, a foot shorter, and much more insecure than all of the other kids standing around, I did what I thought would help me earn cool points: I laughed loudly and said, "Ha! That's great!" ...only to then see his smile turn to a sneer of disdain as he said to the other kids standing around, "See? I told you," as they walked away. That was about thirty years ago, and I'm still ashamed of how much I was seeking their approval. I'm also amazed at how firmly those words and that event took root in my heart and mind.

In a blended family, every word can be powerful. That's one of two main focuses of this passage: guarding our mouths and being aware of the power of our words. The second one, which is common throughout the book of Proverbs and is central to blended family life, is righteousness. But, as is often the case, this passage begins with another reminder to listen to instruction rather than ignoring rebuke or correction. In verse 1 teachability is contrasted with a stubborn refusal to learn, grow, and change. Verses 2-6 focus on aspects of righteousness including how we speak (vs. 2-3), how we work (vs 4), and how we relate to others (vs 5-6).

How we communicate and how we relate to others will absolutely make or break any family, and this is especially true in the ever-changing and already complex relationships within a blended family. Think of how easy it is to misunderstand what should have been an innocent communication from one's ex, or how quickly we can accidentally hurt our children's feelings without intending to. When these situations arise in our homes--and if they haven't for you yet, they probably will--are we willing to listen to God's instructions here, or are we also guilty of scoffing at His rebuke?

Are we guarding our hearts and those of our family? Is the “fruit of our mouth” encouraging, uplifting, and inspiring, or are we carelessly allowing our words to hurt the people around us?

Are we loving righteousness more than ‘rightness’ in our blended families? Or are we acting in a way that we think will satisfy ourselves rather than pursuing a life that is pleasing to God, even if that is difficult and costly?

Prayer: Lord, please guard our hearts, our minds, and our mouths. Help us to love what you love and to pursue what you would have us pursue. Help us to hate falsehood and to pursue righteousness. Please help us to be diligent in guarding our actions and words, and help us to set a good example for our families. Please give us the strength to live out the Gospel faithfully in our homes. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Day 14

Proverbs 14:1-9

- 1 The wisest of women builds her house,
but folly with her own hands tears it down.
- 2 Whoever walks in uprightness fears the Lord,
but he who is devious in his ways despises him.
- 3 By the mouth of a fool comes a rod for his back,
but the lips of the wise will preserve them.
- 4 Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean,
but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox.
- 5 A faithful witness does not lie,
but a false witness breathes out lies.
- 6 A scoffer seeks wisdom in vain,
but knowledge is easy for a man of understanding.
- 7 Leave the presence of a fool,
for there you do not meet words of knowledge.
- 8 The wisdom of the prudent is to discern his way,
but the folly of fools is deceiving.
- 9 Fools mock at the guilt offering,

but the upright enjoy acceptance.

When I think back on my teenage years and the hijinks my friends and I got up to, one word that consistently comes to mind is "foolishness." We toilet paper-ed the trees in people's yards; we ate buffalo wings and threw the bones in the road and laughed as cars drove over them making a hilarious crunching sound; we would wrap each other's cars in plastic wrap or butcher paper just to inconvenience each other. None of this was destructive, but it was a giant waste of time and resources that could have been used more productively.

The word "foolishness" is defined as "lack of good judgment; stupidity." In the Bible, the word also often carries a connotation of a moral failure or shortcoming. I'm not sure if ours were moral failures, but they were certainly evidence of a lack of good judgment!

Another consistent theme throughout Proverbs that is applicable in our families is contrasting foolishness and wisdom. Here, the first verse talks about wise women rather than Proverbs only addressing wisdom to men. It's important that we understand all of these principles about wisdom, righteousness, etc, apply to both men and women, husbands and wives, no matter who they're directly addressed to.

Throughout this passage foolishness and wisdom are contrasted (vs. 1, 3, 6-9) along with the consequences or results of each. In addition we also get another reminder about uprightness (vs 2), honesty (vs 5), and the importance of using well the resources that God has given to us (vs 4). In fact, there are more bits of wisdom in this one passage than can be unpacked in one devotional!

In our blended families, it is important that we always begin with uprightness and honesty in whatever situation God has placed us in. Where you are may be entirely your fault, or it may be almost entirely the fault of others. Regardless of that, God calls us to respond with integrity and righteousness. This is difficult to do and probably not very fun to read, but it is the truth nonetheless.

Often, blended family situations are complicated and can be less than ideal for many of the people involved--kids with two houses, parents who are

embittered toward each other, stepparents feeling disenfranchised, biological parents feeling threatened by stepparents, and the list could go on. Thus it becomes even more important that the parents set a good example for their children about what wisdom looks like, as opposed to showing our children the foolishness, falsity, and folly of the world. They're going to see that anyway, so let's make sure that they don't also see it reinforced at home.

Here, at the end of our second week of this devotional, let us commit to having integrity and pursuing righteousness in our homes and in our relationships with every member of our families.

Prayer: God, please help us to walk in uprightness every day. Thank you for teaching us your wisdom and for sharing with us the way in which we ought to live. Please give us the strength to do the difficult parts of blended family life well, so that we can faithfully live out and share the Gospel everyday, both within our homes and in the world at large. Please make our family a place where the Gospel is seen through our words, our attitudes, and our actions. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 15

Proverbs 15:1-5

- 1 A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.
- 2 The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,
but the mouths of fools pour out folly.
- 3 The eyes of the Lord are in every place,
keeping watch on the evil and the good.
- 4 A gentle tongue is a tree of life,
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.
- 5 A fool despises his father's instruction,
but whoever heeds reproof is prudent.

I wish that I had taken to heart the truth in Proverbs 15:1 when I was much younger. At the time of this writing, I'm 37 years old, and as recently as two weeks ago I lost my temper at our dog Bruiser and yelled at him, using language I never wanted my daughters to hear from me. After apologizing to them and asking their forgiveness, my younger daughter (13 at the time)

said to me, "I do forgive you. I just feel like yelling doesn't always have to be your first line of punishment."

That sentence crushed me because it revealed to me how I've damaged my testimony by always resorting to shouting and yelling in the past. Perhaps if I'd taken this verse to heart at a younger age, my testimony with my kids, my ex-wife, and many others, would be different.

The focus here is almost entirely on communication, and if you've ever read any books on leadership, family life, or marriage, you know that good communication is at the heart of every relationship. This passage also carries with it a reminder of God's omnipresence and a reminder to listen to God's correction. Taken together, it is a strong exhortation to remember that God is God, that we are not, and that He cares about how we talk to and with one another.

In blended families, verse 1 is one of the most important reminders that we have, whether we're dealing with an angry ex (or if WE are the angry ex), or in dealing with a frustrated child. In these situations, one of the easiest ways to cause problems to spiral out of control is by escalating a conflict by escalating our voices.

Everyone knows what this looks like, especially with kids: voices get louder, words get harsher, names are called, old accusations (just or not) get resurrected, and nothing gets solved. Here, God is showing us a better way, a way of patience, grace, gentleness, and prudence. Making a consistent habit of speaking softly, having a gentle tongue, commending knowledge, and listening to (instead of getting defensive in the face of) correction can transform our blended families, and this also sets a powerful positive example for our children...just as yelling at the dog can set a powerful negative example for them.

Prayer: God, please help us to speak gently to others, especially when tempers are already heated. Thank you that you have chosen to deal gently with us through Jesus; that you chose to punish him in our place, and that because of his death and resurrection we can have eternal life with you. Help us to use our words to speak life into our families, especially when it would be easier to speak harshly. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 16

Proverbs 16:1-7

- 1 The plans of the heart belong to man,
but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.
- 2 All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes,
but the Lord weighs the spirit.
- 3 Commit your work to the Lord,
and your plans will be established.
- 4 The Lord has made everything for its purpose,
even the wicked for the day of trouble.
- 5 Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord;
be assured, he will not go unpunished.
- 6 By steadfast love and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for,
and by the fear of the Lord one turns away from evil.
- 7 When a man's ways please the Lord,
he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.

In my ex-wife's family, there was a paraphrase of a passage from the Bible that went like this: "Man makes his plans, but God does something else." I also often tell my students that God must have a sense of humor because he gave me two daughters.

As a high school kid, my plan was to play professional soccer, then one day get married and have sons who would also love soccer and baseball, and then live happily ever after. Instead, literally none of those things happened. I got married, had two daughters (who, thankfully, do enjoy sports, though not as much as I do), got divorced, and now am remarried. Man makes his plans, but God does something else indeed.

A major theme in these verses is the truth of both God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. My youth pastor used to talk about this and compare it to a giant rubber band, which he'd pretend to be stretching in his hands as he said, "This is the tension that we live in: God is sovereign, AND man is responsible. How does that work? I don't know, but I know that it's true."

Ultimately, God is in control of His world (vs 1, 4), but we are accountable for the decisions that we make as well (vs 1, 2). What then? Verse 3 gives us the answer--commit our works to God, and do so through humility, love, and faithfulness.

Blended family life is complex, multi-faceted, and sometimes even downright baffling. Often there is no clear-cut 'right' choice in a situation, and we are hard-pressed to know what to do. When we are faced with these types of difficult circumstances, let us remember a few key truths that Proverbs has to teach us:

- 1) We are called to act with love, faithfulness, and humility, especially when we don't want to, and especially toward our enemies
- 2) We are called to pursue God's will rather than our own
- 3) We need to ask forgiveness for our arrogance and pride
- 4) God is in control, no matter what

With these truths in mind, we can know better how to navigate the difficult waters of blended family life.

Prayer: God, thank you for the reminder that you are sovereign, even if it feels like our world is spinning out of control. Thank you also that we are capable of making our own decisions and responsible for those decisions. Help us to make decisions that will honor you and further your kingdom, and help us to trust you more each day. Please give us the faith we need to live that way. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 17

Proverbs 17:1-4

- 1 Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife.
- 2 A servant who deals wisely will rule over a son who acts shamefully and will share the inheritance as one of the brothers.

- 3 The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold,
and the Lord tests hearts.
- 4 An evildoer listens to wicked lips,
and a liar gives ear to a mischievous tongue.

My parents divorced when I was in middle school, and after that time Thanksgiving celebrations were strange because even though they weren't married anymore, we still all got together. When I say all, I mean *all*: Dad would come over to Mom's house, all the kids would be there, and (after Mom started dating Brian, who I still call my stepdad today even though they never married) my stepdad would also be there.

Sometimes Mom's mom would join us, and sometimes Brian's dad would join us, and it was great! In fact, at the time, I didn't realize that it was unusual to have a peaceful Thanksgiving meal that included one's entire blended family, both biological and stepparents. When I went to college and started comparing stories with some of my roommates and friends, my eyes were opened to just how blessed I had been to see that kind of example.

These verses provide warning and a guidance regarding strife (vs 1), service (vs 2), suffering (vs 3), and our attitude toward gossip (vs 4). Unfortunately, all of these things are present in many blended families, especially at what should be joyous family celebrations. Here God's wisdom makes it clear that in any family it is better to have peace than to have abundance in the midst of turmoil. So we are to be reminded that wisdom and service are key to our lives also, as well as knowing that trials will come, and unfortunately rumors may follow. Our job is to not be the vessels of the suffering, strife, and gossip.

Every blended family knows the struggles of finances and even sometimes the frustration of blended family circumstances. Some know the difficulty of trying to live peacefully in a complex household with confused loyalties and constant stress. Verse 3 is a powerful reminder that these are often allowed to exist in our lives because God is using these experiences to refine us as a precious metal. Part of that process of refining is remembering our words and realizing the words we encourage others to say (by what we "give ears to") are both a reflection of what is in our hearts.

Prayer: God, thank you for loving us in the midst of our difficulties, even if those difficulties are our own fault. Thank you for not leaving us in our past but for using our past to make us more like you in the present and for the future. Give us the strength both to speak and to give ear only to words that are pleasing to you. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 18

Proverbs 18:1-7

- 1 Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire;
he breaks out against all sound judgment.
- 2 A fool takes no pleasure in understanding,
but only in expressing his opinion.
- 3 When wickedness comes, contempt comes also,
and with dishonor comes disgrace.
- 4 The words of a man's mouth are deep waters;
the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.
- 5 It is not good to be partial to the wicked
or to deprive the righteous of justice.
- 6 A fool's lips walk into a fight,
and his mouth invites a beating.
- 7 A fool's mouth is his ruin,
and his lips are a snare to his soul.

As a high school teacher, it is often very tempting to talk *at* students rather than talking *with* my students. When we are talking about historical topics, they are typically uninformed or underinformed, and so I feel their opinions carry limited value. However, my job is to help them to become better informed, and the only way to do that is to listen to what they have to say and then talk it through so that they can better understand their own thoughts.

Unfortunately, there have been times when I've forgotten that and been more interested in being right than I have been in helping them understand something better. I've also been guilty of doing the same thing at home,

with the result being that I made my older daughter feel as if her opinions didn't matter to me, causing lasting hurt to our relationship. I encourage you, then, to take to heart the verses above and to think about the approach you take when speaking with the members of your family.

These verses repeatedly and variously contrast wisdom with foolishness. Wisdom listens while fools only wish to speak--foolishness is then also tied to wickedness (vs 3), contempt and dishonor (vs 3), a beating (vs 6), a ruin and a snare (vs 7). That's quite a list!

In the complexity of a blended family, listening is of infinite value, especially when the emotions of our children are involved. This is also true of adults, though, because we often harbor pain or resentment towards our ex or others, and our words may reflect those hurts especially in the heat of a disagreement.

In this passage we are reminded that it is better to listen justly, without partiality than to foolishly create more problems with our words. Whether listening to our spouse, our ex, or our children, let us seek to understand with wisdom, even if it is difficult, rather than allowing ourselves to selfishly "break out against all sound judgment."

Prayer: God, thank you that you are the God of wisdom and that you hear our prayers, even when we pray in ways we shouldn't. Please teach us to listen more and to express our own opinions less, and please help us to repair the damage we've done in the past. Give us the strength to become more like you in how we relate to others. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 19

Proverbs 19:1-5

- 1 Better is a poor person who walks in his integrity
than one who is crooked in speech and is a fool.
- 2 Desire without knowledge is not good,
and whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way.

- 3 When a man's folly brings his way to ruin,
his heart rages against the Lord.
- 4 Wealth brings many new friends,
but a poor man is deserted by his friend.
- 5 A false witness will not go unpunished,
and he who breathes out lies will not escape.

I want to ask you a difficult question, and it's difficult because it requires total honesty: have you, to the best of your ability, acted with total integrity toward your ex, or have you been guilty of being "crooked in speech", being "a false witness", and/or one who "breathes out lies"? I ask this not to shame or judge you but to get you to really examine your heart and allow God to reveal to you areas in which you need His strength and wisdom to live out the Gospel faithfully.

These verses include themes such as integrity (vs 1, 5), prudence (vs 2), and taking responsibility or blaming God (vs 3). We have here reminders of the type of person that God calls each of us to be, even when our circumstances are difficult or frustrating: we are to have the "mind of Christ" as Paul wrote about in Philippians 1:2, and these verses help us to better understand what that looks like.

In our blended family, it is better for us to "walk in integrity" than to try to gain some worldly advantage through deception. That may feel unfair, especially if you have been wronged and your ex has gained just such an advantage in just such a way. But this is also a reminder that we are ultimately responsible not to our kids, our ex, or even our spouse, but to God first. In addition to acting with integrity, we are reminded to plan ahead carefully (that's what C.S. Lewis and others meant by 'prudence', as we read about in an earlier devotion), and this is even more necessary within the complexities of blended family life.

We are also called to accept responsibility for our role in where we are in life, in what our circumstances are, rather than blaming God or blaming others. This is right to do because God tells us that, and it is also important because by taking responsibility, we are empowered to make changes whereas when we blame God and others, we make ourselves into powerless victims, helpless in the face of Fate or circumstance or whatever you choose to call it.

Finally, we are reminded of the words of Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* in which he wrote, "Truth will out." Eventually, either here on this earth or when we stand in front of Jesus to be judged, the truth will be made known. Or, in the words of Jesus, "The truth shall set you free." All the more reason to ask forgiveness for past wrongs and act with integrity, walking in truth, from this day forward!

Prayer: God, please forgive us for when we have acted selfishly, dishonestly, and in ways that have lacked integrity. Help me instead to walk more closely with you, seeking to honor you with my words, my thoughts, and my actions, even when that's difficult and painful to do. Thank you for sending Jesus to die for my sins so that they might be forgiven, and please help me to forgive others in the same way that you have forgiven me. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 20

Proverbs 20:1-7

- 1 Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler,
and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.
- 2 The terror of a king is like the growling of a lion;
whoever provokes him to anger forfeits his life.
- 3 It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife,
but every fool will be quarreling.
- 4 The sluggard does not plow in the autumn;
he will seek at harvest and have nothing.
- 5 The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water,
but a man of understanding will draw it out.
- 6 Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love,
but a faithful man who can find?
- 7 The righteous who walks in his integrity—
blessed are his children after him!

Reading this passage reminds me of many of the mistakes I made during and after my separation and divorce. I can remember being dependent on alcohol to help me fall asleep, of purposely quarreling with people so that I could vent some of my anger and frustration, and of going astray to seek my own desires rather than what God had called me to. If you're reading this devotional, you may be able to identify with some of those things in your past as well.

These verses contain warnings against just such choices as those, and many members of blended families have seen the negative effects of alcoholism (vs 1), anger (vs 2), constant quarreling (vs 3), laziness (vs 4), and unfaithfulness (vs 6). The statistics about these are staggering, as are the negative impacts that these have on our children. This is doubly true for blended families because our mistakes affect more people and add on top of whatever issues we brought into the blended family.

However, happily these verses also provide guidance for our behavior and choices, culminating in an encouraging reminder in verse 7 about the blessings of walking in integrity. We are blessed to serve a God whose grace is bigger than our sins, and whose Son died so that we might become new in Him.

If you've struggled with alcohol abuse, you're not alone.

If you've struggled with anger, you're not alone.

If you've struggled with quarreling or laziness, you're not alone.

And if you're still struggling with any of these, you're not alone.

Reach out and ask for help from a pastor, a counselor, a trusted friend. And be comforted as you seek help, knowing that God's grace is sufficient for all of our needs. Whatever we have done in the past, let us choose to follow Christ now and every day hence, so that we might see and know the truth in verse 7: "The righteous who walks in his integrity--blessed are his children after him!" This is what we all want for our children, to be blessed. Let us live in such a way as to receive that blessing from God, no matter what we've done in the past.

Prayer: God, thank you that you are faithful even when we have failed to be so. Thank you for reminding us that we do not have to remain in our sins or be shackled by our past. Help us to be faithful men and women who seek to honor you in our families, and give us the strength to do so. Please forgive us of our sins, and help us to forgive ourselves and the ones who have wronged us. Most importantly, help us to love you more. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 21

Proverbs 21:1-5

- 1 The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord;
he turns it wherever he will.
- 2 Every way of a man is right in his own eyes,
but the Lord weighs the heart.
- 3 To do righteousness and justice
is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.
- 4 Haughty eyes and a proud heart,
the lamp of the wicked, are sin.
- 5 The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance,
but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.

I'm a huge fan of J.R.R. Tolkien's epic story *The Lord of the Rings*, and one of my favorite characters in the story is an Ent named Treebeard. He's the oldest of all living beings in Middle-earth, and he and his entire race (the Ents) are known for being careful and deliberate in their words, their deliberations, and their decisions. Once they've made a decision, however, they are able to act quickly and with a firmness that astonishes others. One phrase they are known for, and that would serve us well especially in blended families is, "Don't be hasty."

These verses contrast the wisdom (vs 1) of righteousness, justice, humility and diligence with things such as pride (vs 2, 4), sacrifice (vs 3), and hastiness (vs 5). We are called to learn and practice wisdom in all areas of

our lives, and these verses give us even more guidance on what that should look like in our blended families.

Hastiness often leads us to make unwise decisions that lead to unintended and entirely preventable consequences. Unfortunately, this hastiness is frequently related to pride. Pride gets in the way of positive blended families more than anything else. Pride causes us to speak when we should listen, or ad-lib on our own when we should be collaborating on how to address a complicated issue. It causes us to act in ways that we come to regret, thus also leading to resentment and frustration in others.

If we're honest, verse 4 accurately describes many of us, as we are haughty and proud of ourselves or our accomplishments, and this leads to two areas of discord: 1) a lack of awareness of our own shortcomings, and 2) a lack of compassion for others. Either can be catastrophic in a blended family, while both together are sure to be disastrous.

So, what's the solution? As simple as it sounds, the first step is to acknowledge that we are, in fact, prideful and need God's grace to humble us, to cause us to be honest with ourselves and to seek what God wants rather than our own desires. And second, we have to do this every single day, multiple times each day. It's a never-ending process, but it's also one that will lead to better self-awareness and, paradoxically, the self-forgetfulness of true humility.

Prayer: God our Father, thank you for desiring righteousness and justice more than sacrifice, and thank you for sending Jesus to be our righteousness and to fulfill your justice, because we admit that we cannot on our own. Please forgive us when we are hasty, when we act with pride, and when we pursue our own ends rather than yours. Please continue to change us into the people you created us to be, and help us to lead our families in a way that draws us all closer to you and to each other. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 22

Proverbs 22:1-6

- 1 A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favor is better than silver or gold.
- 2 The rich and the poor meet together;
the Lord is the Maker of them all.
- 3 The prudent sees danger and hides himself,
but the simple go on and suffer for it.
- 4 The reward for humility and fear of the Lord
is riches and honor and life.
- 5 Thorns and snares are in the way of the crooked;
whoever guards his soul will keep far from them.
- 6 Train up a child in the way he should go;
even when he is old he will not depart from it.

Shakespeare once wrote, in *Romeo and Juliet*, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Remember that in this story, the star-crossed lovers have fallen for each other despite the terrible feud that exists between their families, and the names of Montague and Capulet carried much significance. As profound as Shakespeare's quote is, I am afraid the Bible disagrees: names are important, as they carry significance and meaning.

These verses encourage us to take seriously the pursuit of wisdom, from how we train our children to every decision-making process. And by doing so, we will be creating not just a name for ourselves, but more importantly we'll be reflecting the name of Jesus more accurately to a world that desperately needs to know Him. This begins in our own home, because we are the first 'Jesus' that our children will see. In blended families this is magnified because so many children in blended families have already seen their parents make mistakes or selfish decisions or hurtful choices. I say this as a man who is still working on rebuilding a relationship with my daughters, ten years after their mom and I went through our divorce.

The two well-known verses that book-end this passage remind us of how central the pursuit of wisdom should be in our own blended family. Verse 1 reminds us that while riches can be pleasant, it is more important to possess character, integrity, and thus the "good name" we discussed already. I often tell my daughters, "Remember who you are, and remember whose you are."

This reminder about the importance of belonging to Jesus is also good for me to pay attention to.

Verse 6 also encourages us to remember that we are not only to live a life pursuing wisdom but also that part of pursuing wisdom is teaching our children to do the same. This will be more complicated in a blended family, just like everything else is more complicated in a blended family. Yet we have this comfort: the Teacher of wisdom will Himself guide us as we guide our children and as we seek to follow Him with prudence (vs 3), humility (vs 4), and faithfulness (vs 5 "guard your soul").

Day 23

Proverbs 23:1-8

- 1 When you sit down to eat with a ruler,
 observe carefully what is before you,
- 2 and put a knife to your throat
 if you are given to appetite.
- 3 Do not desire his delicacies,
 for they are deceptive food.
- 4 Do not toil to acquire wealth;
 be discerning enough to desist.
- 5 When your eyes light on it, it is gone,
 for suddenly it sprouts wings,
 flying like an eagle toward heaven.
- 6 Do not eat the bread of a man who is stingy;
 do not desire his delicacies,
- 7 for he is like one who is inwardly calculating.
 "Eat and drink!" he says to you,
 but his heart is not with you.
- 8 You will vomit up the morsels that you have eaten,
 and waste your pleasant words.

In his famous work *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis writes about the four cardinal virtues of the ancient world: justice, temperance, fortitude, and

prudence. These particular verses center on the theme of prudence, which Lewis describes by saying, "Prudence means practical common sense, taking the trouble to think out what you are doing and what is likely to come of it." In these verses, God is reminding us to use wisdom, discernment, and prudence in all areas of our blended family life.

It is not hard to find stories of men and women who have let their emotions get the best of them, whether those emotions are portrayed as good or bad. However, what we also see is that many (most?) of these stories center around negative consequences of anger, hurt, jealousy, etc, that are a result of acting with imprudence. I enjoy plenty of Disney movies, just like most Americans, but the advice to "Follow your heart" that is so often mentioned explicitly or implicitly in those movies is just not very good advice.

As adults in blended families, it is good for us to be aware of the dangers of acting solely or even mostly out of our emotions. Doing so, ignoring prudence, can cause more pain and more resentment, especially when there are children involved. In an overly simplified example I often use in my classroom, I ask my teenage students the following question: "If you acted on every emotion you felt throughout the school day, how many of you would still be here at the end of the day, compared to how many of you would be suspended for punching someone in the face?" The chuckles of laughter let me know that they see the point. As a friend of mine, Dondi Scumaci, once wrote, "Emotions are important for the journey...but I don't let them drive the car!"

In addition to the warnings about prudence, there is also a reminder regarding greed versus contentment in our blended family (vs. 4-5)--whether greed for money and possessions or simply an overly-selfish desire to have our own way. It's important to remember that we have to accept and embrace compromise and collaboration as a key aspect of a successful blended family.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for reminding us that you are more than enough for us, that you want us to desire you more than riches, or good food, or a comfortable life. Thank you that you also have blessed us with more than we need to survive. Help us to exercise wisdom and prudence, and help us to make decisions that honor you and build up, rather than decisions that honor ourselves and tear down. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 24

Proverbs 24:1-6

- 1 Be not envious of evil men,
nor desire to be with them,
- 2 for their hearts devise violence,
and their lips talk of trouble.
- 3 By wisdom a house is built,
and by understanding it is established;
- 4 by knowledge the rooms are filled
with all precious and pleasant riches.
- 5 A wise man is full of strength,
and a man of knowledge enhances his might,
- 6 for by wise guidance you can wage your war,
and in abundance of counselors there is victory.

As a student and teacher of history for most of my life, I can say with certainty that one of the main causes of strife in the world, both on a large scale and on a small scale, is envy. Envy can be described as, "A feeling of discontented or resentful longing aroused by someone else's possessions, qualities, or luck." As a person who is only 5'3" tall, I've envied most people I've ever met, simply for their height: they probably don't struggle to reach their own kitchen shelves, or have to hem every pair of pants they own, or get water on their shirts each time they wash their hands because they don't have to stand so close to the sink to reach the faucet. These are (mostly) facetious examples of my envy, but there's also a grain of truth in them in that envy doesn't have to be about big things in order to exist. And anywhere it exists, there also exists the potential for trouble.

These verses carry a strong and stern warning against envy (vs 1-2) and more reminders about the power, benefits, and importance of wisdom (vs. 3-5). In every blended family, there will be room for improvement, which also means the potential for envy, just as there will always be those who have what we desire. It could be about a home, or a job, or a car, or it could be about a relationship or the ability to spend more time with family. Whatever the envy may stem from, it's important that we learn the lesson of

Paul. Paul had been shipwrecked, whipped, beaten, left for dead, and faced other problems and yet he wrote in Philippians 4:11 that he had learned to be content, "in whatever situation I am." How many of us can say the same, though we don't face the same dangers and persecutions Paul did?

One of the aspects of contentedness is the pursuit of Godly wisdom, whose qualities are expounded upon beautifully in this passage, where we see its importance to a "house," and its power to build a pleasant home. Isn't that a common desire for blended families, a more cooperative and positive relationship with all involved? If so, the way to have that is found here, through wisdom.

Another key application here for blended families is that "in abundance of counselors there is victory." We need to be slower to rely on our own judgment alone and quicker to ask for the views of others who may help us see things more clearly. That may mean a friend, an in-law, a pastor, a counselor, a therapist, or even consulting a book, but whatever the sources, be sure to seek out the wisdom and guidance of others who have walked these same roads before.

Finally, as always, let us seek not only wisdom itself but also the Author of wisdom, God the Father. Let us seek how to best glorify Him and in doing so learn to be more and more content, regardless of the specific situations that we will face each day.

Prayer: God, thank you for reminding us that we are to find our rest and contentment by pursuing you. Thank you for teaching us wisdom and for strengthening us through that wisdom. We ask you to give us guidance for ourselves and our families; help us to learn to be more like you in our relationships, and help us to pursue you more today than we did yesterday. Please forgive us when we fall short of what you have called us to, and please help us to love others more than we love ourselves. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 25

Proverbs 25:1-7

More Proverbs of Solomon

1 These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied.

2 It is the glory of God to conceal things,
but the glory of kings is to search things out.

3 As the heavens for height, and the earth for depth,
so the heart of kings is unsearchable.

4 Take away the dross from the silver,
and the smith has material for a vessel;

5 take away the wicked from the presence of the king,
and his throne will be established in righteousness.

6 Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence
or stand in the place of the great,

7 for it is better to be told, "Come up here,"
than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

What your eyes have seen

8 do not hastily bring into court,
for what will you do in the end,
when your neighbor puts you to shame?

I've been an athlete or coach for most of my life, and sports has played an enormous role in shaping who I am: fiercely competitive, focused on fundamentals, etc. However, in sports, many of the best athletes seek to gain an advantage by living in the "gray area" between what is allowed by the rules and what is not. Some people talk about "the spirit of the game" versus "the laws of the game," that is, what a player did may be technically legal but it went against what the game is supposed to be about.

Most of my athletic experience has been with the game of soccer, and soccer players have a reputation for "diving" or embellishing the physicality of the game in order to gain an advantage by getting fouls called against the other team. This frustrated me as a player and continues to frustrate me as a coach because, while I am competitive and want to win, I was also brought up to believe that if you couldn't win with integrity, then it wasn't worth winning. I've told multiple teams that if we have to choose between cheating to win or losing honorably, I'll choose to lose honorably every time. It's an

important life lesson for teenage athletes to learn: integrity and humility is more important than temporal victory

In these verses we get a reminder of God's sovereignty (vs 2) and of the importance of integrity (vs 3-5) and humility (vs 6-7). None of these are new concepts at this point in Proverbs, but they are two of the most common themes in this book, which should tell us that God views these as important enough to repeat.

In a blended family, these three themes take on outsized importance, especially because we may have mismanaged them in the past, or set a less-than-desirable example to our children, and now we need to do better. It is easy to give lip-service to God's sovereignty while really relying on ourselves. In the emotional upheaval of a divorce and afterward, it's also very easy to forget our responsibility to live with integrity and humility.

As we've stated before, blended family life is complex, difficult, and full of trials. Rarely does anything go exactly as we might wish. Yet we are still called to live with integrity, called to do the right thing no matter the consequences, and in doing so to glorify God. Thus it is of the utmost importance that we live with humility and integrity, putting the needs of others before our own needs. And in the midst of all of these things, it's wonderful to be reminded that God is sovereign, and that His sovereignty will never change.

Prayer: God, thank you for reminding us that you are sovereign and that you have called us to live in such a way as to honor you. Help us to, as your word says, walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called, even and especially when it is difficult. Forgive us when we forget who we are supposed to be, and help us to live with more integrity and humility than before. Give us the strength to set powerful examples for our children. And help us to be a light in a dark world. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 26

Proverbs 26:1-7

- 1 Like snow in summer or rain in harvest,
so honor is not fitting for a fool.
- 2 Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying,
a curse that is causeless does not alight.
- 3 A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey,
and a rod for the back of fools.
- 4 Answer not a fool according to his folly,
lest you be like him yourself.
- 5 Answer a fool according to his folly,
lest he be wise in his own eyes.
- 6 Whoever sends a message by the hand of a fool
cuts off his own feet and drinks violence.
- 7 Like a lame man's legs, which hang useless,
is a proverb in the mouth of fools.

I don't know about you, but I've done some pretty foolish things in my day, things that weren't necessarily bad but which also didn't serve any good purpose. I was recently having a conversation with my teenage daughters about some of the hijinks that my best friend and I got up to as teenage boys: throwing toilet paper in trees of people's yards, ringing people's doorbells and then running away laughing before they came to answer the door, etc. None of these things were destructive or caused damage; but they were annoying inconveniences for people who didn't deserve them. And looking back, they're not things that I'm terribly proud of. On the other hand, I am thankful that God's grace kept me from getting involved in foolishness that could have had much larger consequences.

These verses are one giant warning against foolishness. Over and over, these verses emphasize that foolishness is unhelpful to others, damaging to the fool, and ought to be avoided. And examining foolishness is a dangerous exercise because it is very easy to overlook our own foolish tendencies while focusing on those of others. Remember the plank versus the speck example that Jesus gave? It's like that.

In our blended families, we can't afford to be foolish because there is already too much at stake. We need to be willing to examine our own hearts and actions and ask God to show us our foolishness and to help us grow out of it. Do we take petty revenge on our ex by purposely waiting to respond to

messages just because we know it irritates them? Do we treat our stepchildren differently because they treat us with less respect than we'd like? Do we hold grudges against our spouse for things that occurred days, weeks, months, or even years before?

We need to have the humility to listen when we are confronted and corrected, or when suggestions are made, even if they seem contradictory (vs 4-5). We need God's wisdom to help us know when to 'answer a fool' and when to not answer a fool. And we need to be willing to admit when we're the fool in question! Let us seek God's wisdom for our families by learning to become less selfish and foolish and more reliant on Him. And let us pray that He will do the same for our children.

Prayer: God, please forgive us not only for when we are foolish but also for when we are too proud to see it. Open our eyes to our foolish habits and attitudes, and continue to sanctify us by making us less foolish and more wise. Please give us wisdom to lead our families, and help us to show our children who you are by living in a way that points them to you. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 27

Proverbs 27:1-6

- 1 Do not boast about tomorrow,
for you do not know what a day may bring.
- 2 Let another praise you, and not your own mouth;
a stranger, and not your own lips.
- 3 A stone is heavy, and sand is weighty,
but a fool's provocation is heavier than both.
- 4 Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming,
but who can stand before jealousy?
- 5 Better is open rebuke
than hidden love.
- 6 Faithful are the wounds of a friend;
profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

In our house, Thursday evenings are usually the nights when we have “leftovers” for dinner. My wife and daughters have usually cooked dinner most of the other nights of the week; we’ve had athletic events or choir concerts to attend throughout the week; and by Thursday we’re all ready to wind down before the girls switchover and go back to their mom’s house on Friday. I love leftover-Thursdays because there is typically a wide variety of good food to choose from, lots of different options and all of them good ones.

That’s kind of how I feel about this passage and these verses, though without intending or implying any disrespect by comparing them with “leftovers”: there are lots of different themes, all previously touched on, and all worth being reminded of in our families. There are reminders about humility (vs 1-2), the dangers of foolishness (vs 3) and jealousy (vs 4), and the importance of being active and open regarding our love (vs 5-6). Any and all of these are wonderful “meals” on their own. Together, they make up a wonderful “leftover” dinner for us as we near the end of our month together in this devotional.

In a blended family, every negative emotion is magnified, or at least it can seem that way: arrogance, anger, jealousy, all can cause more damage because of the already complex make-up of the relationships within blended families. Thus, there is a greater need for conscious effort regarding positive emotions and relationship building: humility instead of arrogance, gentleness instead of anger, and love rather than jealousy.

The negative emotions are easier and take less effort, and for those of us who have struggled with anger for most of our lives, the negative emotions may even seem more natural! It’s always easier to tear down than it is to build up, and we may even receive a temporary sort of satisfaction from tearing others down (I say this as one who has been guilty of this on many occasions in the past). However, if we’re to have any hope of having a successful, positive, cooperative blended family relationship, we need God’s help to choose positive responses, knowing that it will be worth it in the end.

Prayer: God, thank you for loving us enough to remind us repeatedly of who you want us to be and how you want us to live. Help us to pursue a closer relationship to Christ, so that your spirit might make us more like Him.

Please forgive us for our anger, arrogance, jealousy, and foolishness, and instead cause us to grow in gentleness, humility, love, and wisdom. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 28

Proverbs 28:1-6

- 1 The wicked flee when no one pursues,
but the righteous are bold as a lion.
- 2 When a land transgresses, it has many rulers,
but with a man of understanding and knowledge,
its stability will long continue.
- 3 A poor man who oppresses the poor
is a beating rain that leaves no food.
- 4 Those who forsake the law praise the wicked,
but those who keep the law strive against them.
- 5 Evil men do not understand justice,
but those who seek the Lord understand it completely.
- 6 Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity
than a rich man who is crooked in his ways.

I've made more mistakes than I care to remember, both regarding my blended family and simply in my personal life. Some of those mistakes have been costly, causing pain to others and to myself, while others seemed to not carry tremendous weight or consequences. The problem is, we often don't know we're making a mistake until it's too late; other times, we don't realize how big the consequences are going to be.

Do you remember getting in trouble as a child, and then complaining about your punishment, only for a parent to respond with, "Well you should have thought about that before you (fill in the blank with whatever you did to get in trouble)?" I heard that on a number of occasions, and I've even said it to my kids. When I was younger it used to frustrate me because I felt like it was unreasonable to anticipate the consequences of my actions to the degree my parents seemed to expect.

However, as a father of two teenage daughters in a complex blended family, I now see much more clearly the wisdom of their words and expectations, and so one of my major goals is to help my girls think things through beforehand, in order to help them make better decisions. Earlier in this devotional, we referred to this as prudence. And these verses show us another aspect of prudence, which is to contrast two things and to choose the good while avoiding the evil. These verses contrast wickedness with righteousness (vs 1), transgression with understanding/knowledge (vs 2), innocent with the guilty (vs 3-4), evil with seeking of God (vs 5), and integrity with crookedness (vs 6).

We have seen contrasts throughout Proverbs, and we often see these same contrasts in our families. Blended families are not the same as traditional, nuclear families, and as a result we face issues that other families do not. Thanks be to God that His wisdom is here to help us in our decision-making, our relationships, and our homes!

In blended families, it is crucial that we pursue the Godly and forsake the sinful. I believe in original sin, and I believe that we're all capable of varying degrees of wickedness, transgression, oppression, evil, and greed. If we look around our culture, we see these play out in blended families on a regular basis. A casual scroll through social media feeds about divorce or custody issues does not paint a pretty picture, nor does it give much hope for the future.

However, with God's help, we can fruitfully pursue the opposite of what is easy and what is common, instead choosing to pursue what is difficult and uncommon and is only possible through Grace. We can pursue righteousness, service, justice, integrity, mercy, love, hope, wisdom, understanding, and we can do these things in a way that shows God's love to our very complex family systems. Our families are complicated, and the world isn't providing us with guidance. Thank God that He does!

Prayer: God, thank you for showing yourself, continually, to be our guide and to be our Lord. Help us to trust in You no matter what, and help us to seek your wisdom and understanding so that we also may learn to treat others better. Most importantly, Lord, help us to live out the Gospel of Jesus

faithfully in our families so that we can grow closer to you. We pray all of this in Jesus' name, amen.

Day 29

Proverbs 29:1-7

- 1 He who is often reprov'd, yet stiffens his neck,
will suddenly be broken beyond healing.
- 2 When the righteous increase, the people rejoice,
but when the wicked rule, the people groan.
- 3 He who loves wisdom makes his father glad,
but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth.
- 4 By justice a king builds up the land,
but he who exacts gifts tears it down.
- 5 A man who flatters his neighbor
spreads a net for his feet.
- 6 An evil man is ensnared in his transgression,
but a righteous man sings and rejoices.
- 7 A righteous man knows the rights of the poor;
a wicked man does not understand such knowledge.

One of the most difficult aspects of Christianity, and one of the most misunderstood in my opinion, is that of reconciliation. It is central to our faith because through Christ's death and resurrection we are reconciled to God instead of having to spend eternity apart from Him. However, here on earth I know that reconciling with others is not something that people like to hear about because it requires humility, wisdom, and a desire for righteousness, not just a desire for right-ness.

One of the major causes of friction between former spouses is leftover disagreements from the marriage that continue to cause problems after the divorce. It is this type of situation that comes to mind when I think of the difficulty of reconciliation: it doesn't mean that you and your ex have to get back together, but it does mean that you should be working to heal the

relationship...even if you are the only one who is working on it, and even if they wounded you deeply.

What you just read may have offended or hurt you, and if so I am sorry for that, but it is no less true. These verses talk about the topics mentioned above: humility, wisdom, and a desire for righteousness, and if we truly are pursuing those, then we need to be seeking for ways to heal the hurts we have caused in the past.

Is your blended family rejoicing or groaning (vs 2)?

Are you as a family collectively pursuing wisdom, or is it one that "stiffens its neck" at reproof?

The truth is that *we all need work* (and not just your ex!), so we need to commit to pursuing God's values and desires for our families. And God does not desire us to live in a continual state of strife, discord, and seething resentment--I mention those specifically because I remember living in that place for months following my divorce. Rather, God desires us to seek reconciliation and peace. He desires us to be open to reproof, to seek righteousness and wisdom, and to ask Him for understanding in the midst of hurt, or confusion, or complexity. How we choose to respond to these desires of God will go a long way toward the health or hurt we bring to our blended families.

Prayer: God, thank you that you are a God who desires reconciliation, because without it, we are lost. Help us to remember that it is only by your grace that any of us escape your wrath. And in that knowledge, help us to seek to reconcile with others and forgive them, the way that you have forgiven us. Help us to show love and mercy, even if we feel others don't deserve it, because even while we were sinners you showed your love to us through Jesus' death and resurrection. It is in Jesus' name that we pray, amen.

Day 30

Proverbs 30:1-9

The words of Agur son of Jakeh. The oracle.

The man declares, I am weary, O God;

I am weary, O God, and worn out.

2 Surely I am too stupid to be a man.

I have not the understanding of a man.

3 I have not learned wisdom,

nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.

4 Who has ascended to heaven and come down?

Who has gathered the wind in his fists?

Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment?

Who has established all the ends of the earth?

What is his name, and what is his son's name?

Surely you know!

5 Every word of God proves true;

he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.

6 Do not add to his words,

lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar.

7 Two things I ask of you;

deny them not to me before I die:

8 Remove far from me falsehood and lying;

give me neither poverty nor riches;

feed me with the food that is needful for me,

9 lest I be full and deny you

and say, "Who is the Lord?"

or lest I be poor and steal

and profane the name of my God.

In the movie *Rudy* (one of my all-time favorites!), a character named Father Cavanaugh is providing spiritual guidance for the title character. In doing so, he reveals that, after years spent in the church he has reached a profound and important understanding: "Son, in thirty-five years of religious study, I have only come up with two hard incontrovertible facts: there is a God, and I'm not Him."

When did you first discover your own limitations? For me, it was at a pretty young age that I realized I was not going to be able to do what everyone else could. I stand about 5'3" tall (part of why I love the movie *Rudy*), and I've always been shorter than my friends, classmates, teammates, and colleagues. It was very apparent that everyday tasks would be somewhat more challenging, often requiring me to jump when they could just reach, or to use a stool (or, as a child, climb on the countertop!) to get to the top cabinets.

These are silly examples of limitations, but I hope they cause you to also reflect and remember when you first started discovering yours because it's imperative that we do so if we are to lead our families well. We may not necessarily feel quite as frustrated as the Psalmist does here (vs 1-3), but if we're honest, most of us can remember feeling like that. Thankfully, God reminds us of just who He is and how powerful He is (vs 4-6) and then we see an excellent example of a request worth remembering (vs 7-9).

If you've read this far, you know that our blended families will often give us cause to remember our limitations, and just in case we forget, these verses are an excellent reminder. We can't (and shouldn't) get everything our own way; we don't know all the answers; we can't fix all of the problems; and even if we could, tomorrow we're likely to face new ones.

We will never have the power and wisdom of God, so we need to be relying on Him to provide power and wisdom in our families. We need to rely on Him for all of the tangible necessities of our lives, and even more so because of the complicated nature of blended families. School lunches, sports schedules, holiday trips and gifts, sibling rivalries...the list of complications could go on for pages. The more we actually think about the details of our lives, the more it should cause us to run to Christ for comfort, wisdom, and strength.

Prayer: God, thank you for reminding us that we are not you. Help us to rely on you more each day for wisdom, for strength, and for our daily bread. Please forgive us when we take no notice of you, or worse, when we try to place ourselves in your stead. Help us to seek you more today than we did yesterday, and please help us to lead our families in a way that brings glory to you and shares the Gospel faithfully with them. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 31

Proverbs 31:1-31

The Words of King Lemuel

The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him:

- 2 What are you doing, my son? What are you doing, son of my womb?
What are you doing, son of my vows?
- 3 Do not give your strength to women,
your ways to those who destroy kings.
- 4 It is not for kings, O Lemuel,
it is not for kings to drink wine,
or for rulers to take strong drink,
- 5 lest they drink and forget what has been decreed
and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.
- 6 Give strong drink to the one who is perishing,
and wine to those in bitter distress;
- 7 let them drink and forget their poverty
and remember their misery no more.
- 8 Open your mouth for the mute,
for the rights of all who are destitute.
- 9 Open your mouth, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.

The Woman Who Feels the Lord

- 10 An excellent wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
- 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
- 12 She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.
- 13 She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.
- 14 She is like the ships of the merchant;

she brings her food from afar.
15 She rises while it is yet night
and provides food for her household
and portions for her maidens.
16 She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
17 She dresses herself with strength
and makes her arms strong.
18 She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.
19 She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
20 She opens her hand to the poor
and reaches out her hands to the needy.
21 She is not afraid of snow for her household,
for all her household are clothed in scarlet.
22 She makes bed coverings for herself;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
23 Her husband is known in the gates
when he sits among the elders of the land.
24 She makes linen garments and sells them;
she delivers sashes to the merchant.
25 Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
26 She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
27 She looks well to the ways of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
28 Her children rise up and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:
29 "Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all."
30 Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
31 Give her of the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the gates.

Proverbs 31 is familiar to many people for verses 10-31, with their description of a Godly woman. Verses 1-9, though, are a call to all of us to

remember who we are and whose we are, and to remember the responsibilities that come with our positions as adults in a blended family. We need to be sober-minded, honorable, and righteous if we are to lead our families well.

Fathers, look at the principles in verses 1-9 for guidance and reminders for both ourselves and our children: sobriety, justice, encouragement for those hurting, and righteousness toward all. In a family that has been broken, you and your actions and attitude will have a tremendous impact on helping your family heal and grow.

Mothers, you've probably heard verses 10-31 quoted dozens of times as a model for the type of woman God wants you to be. Imagine how powerful this will be in your blended family: a strong, Godly example of womanhood in a family that needs it (because every blended family does!). In a family that has been broken, your actions and attitude, just as much as the fathers, will have a tremendous impact on helping your family heal and grow.

Go back and re-read this Proverb one more time, and ask God to help you grow into the type of person described here.

Prayer: God, thank you for our family, broken and hurting though it may be, struggling like many others, and facing issues that we are not capable of fixing on our own. Help us to be willing to ask for aid, help us to aid others, and help us to do all of this in faithful dependence upon you. Please forgive us when we fall short of what you have called us to, and help us to grow more like Jesus today. Jesus, thank you for living sinlessly, faithfully, and perfectly. Thank you for dying in our place. Thank you for conquering death through your resurrection. Draw us closer to you each day. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.