

Platitudes & Proverbs, Memes & Mantras (Human Words vs. God's Truth)

Truly quote-worthy truisms are actually hard to write. I know, I know, Solomon “*spoke 3,000 proverbs*,” but he had the notable help of the *divine inspiration*, cf. 1Kings 4:12,32. Barring such, it takes an unusually perceptive mind and uncommon articulatory skills to not only see but also *encapsulate* a genuinely enlightening statement in a pithy way that resonates with relevant clarity (and perhaps even wit). While I do not possess those qualities in any amount above mediocre at best, I do appreciate them in those that do... especially those that use them to foster further comprehension of eternal truths rather than in mere social or political sarcasm.

But there are a few substantial challenges to that kind of endeavor. For one, *relevance*. The subject matter cannot leave the hearer/reader with a “So what?” response. If the *proverb* is not *pertinent*, it has no laudable purpose. Second, it must be *concise*. Few will pause long enough to consider, let alone comprehend, a *proverb* of more than a brief sentence or two. There are few *proverbial* “paragraphs”- fewer still that are remembered, applied, and quoted. Third, it should strive for *universality*. Exceptions and those “on the other hand” exclusions limit its benefit. The more “universal” the truth it reveals in the most “universal” applications, the more “universal” its acceptance and benefit becomes.

Given these things, it seems to me (for whatever that might be worth to you), that there are some modern *proverbial* sayings that have enjoyed a much wider hearing than they deserve. Consider a couple of them as examples:

- **“He was in the *wrong place at the wrong time*.”** Is there really a “right time” to be in the “wrong place”? Isn’t it being the “wrong place” sufficient reason to avoid that location regardless of the “time”? While one can certainly be in the “right place” at the “wrong time”- unaccounted for Time Zone differences, miscommunications, and forgotten Daylight-Saving Time adjustments certainly contribute, there really isn’t a “right time” to be in the “wrong place.” And if it’s only the “wrong place” because of the timing, then it isn’t really “the place” that’s the problem, is it? The *“naïve... young man lacking sense”* passed through *“the street near her corner”* and *“took the way to her house”* (“her” being *the harlot*) *“in the middle of the night and in the darkness,”* in Proverbs 7:6-10. Though “the time” certainly didn’t help, would such have been the “right place” at *any* time?
- **“People don’t care *how much you know unless they know how much you care*.”** I think I understand the main premise here: That we *should care* for those whom we propose to teach. If this is what is intended, Jesus’ *compassion* for those whom He saw as *“sheep without a shepherd”* moving Him to *“teach them many things”* in Mark 6:34 well illustrates the point. But this modern “proverb” has some problematic issues with that “on the other hand” aspect discussed above. For instance, if our *willingness to listen* to (especially eternal or spiritual) truth(s) we need is dependent upon the level of interest or concern we perceive the *teller of that truth* has for us personally, then our focus needs adjustment. Our love for ourselves has superseded our love of truth. “Truth” is true regardless of *who tells it*, or how in particular they feel about me! Obviously, “truth-telling” should be motivated by

proper love and regard for its object. But, your “enemy” - who is less concerned about your *feelings*, may well be more willing to tell you the truth about yourself than your “friends” who are too concerned about them. Consider Titus 1:12, “*One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’*” Paul affirmed these words in the next sentence, “*This testimony is true.*” Regardless of how this particular prophet felt about his own people, the Cretans needed to hear and accept this “truth” about themselves in order to change for the better. If we’re *only* willing to listen to truth when we think the teller of it really cares about us, then we think more of ourselves than we do truth. It is our desire for and “*love of truth*” that determines our eternal destiny, cf. 2Thessalonians 2:10, regardless of who provides it, or how they feel about “me.”

These are only two examples, but perhaps they will give us pause in accepting and adopting platitudes and mantras that don’t really “measure up” to a true *proverb*- “*Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar,*” Romans 3:4. And as our Savior prayed to the Father, “*Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth,*” John 17:17.

So, what are the “take-aways” here? 1) Be *contemplative* and *discerning*. Though “human” words can and often do help us to better understand “God’s” words, never allow *flawed* men’s ideas and the expression of them- no matter how catchy or proverbial they may sound, to supplant divinely-inspired words. If God said it, it is true; if man said it, it *may* be true... or not. 2) “*Buy truth, and do not sell it, get wisdom and instruction and understanding,*” Proverbs 23:23. There is nothing more valuable to the human soul than truth, for only through truth can it be redeemed. And finally, 3) Never allow how someone else feels (or doesn’t feel) about you to limit your *willingness to hear* or *ability to apply* truth. It may be that the truth you most need to hear comes from someone who doesn’t even really know you. (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at southportcofc.org; email to mrpcstrong@hotmail.com)