

## An Exploration of Proverbial Wisdom in the *Parables of Kierkegaard*

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### Abstract

In this article, I have tried to explore the proverbial wisdom stated in the parables of Kierkegaard. I have collected proverbs in the book *Parables of Kierkegaard* edited by Thomas C. Oden. Parables are unique from other types of short stories as they are told by the person practicing religious duties. Therefore, it is essential to study the proverbs to interpret the wisdom. It is crucial to describe the context in which the proverbs are used; hence, I have explored the contexts of the proverbs. The contextualization gives us an idea of whether the proverbs relate to mythological, cultural, traditional, environmental, or religious aspects. It is essential to look at these contexts to study wisdom derived from them. Thus, I have tried to explore the wisdom that proverbs convey through the parables. Kierkegaard starts the parables with questions and the parables include proverbs stating the moral advice to the people either by a learned person or a philosopher. The wisdom mentioned in the parables gives a universal moral message to the general public so that they become wise.

**Keywords:** Folklore, Kierkegaard, Parables, Proverbs Stories, Wisdom

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### Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is known to be the first Christian existentialist philosopher, poet, critic, and theologian from Denmark. He has written many moral, ethical, and religious texts using metaphor and irony. His writing exhibited his liking for parables which earned him a prominent name in writing parables, stories, and metaphors. His parables are so impressive that they are remarkably memorable compared to any other genre he wrote. He has been exceptional

in parabolic communication in his exemplary parables. His technique of indirect communication through parables makes his parables so impressive. His style of storytelling is unique therefore, it becomes an encapsulating form. Oden states that interpreting Kierkegaard's parables takes the turn of parables interpreting us (ix). The parables he wrote make the readers self-aware, instilling ethical and philosophical perception so they can experience an authentic human existence.

The proverbs in the parables of Kierkegaard fulfill the aim with which he wrote them. They extend spiritual, moral, and philosophical wisdom to the readers. Kierkegaard has successfully used proverbs in his parables. It is, therefore, necessary to study the proverbs in these parables to explore the wisdom expressed through the proverbs. I have interpreted the proverbs in the light of parables and derived the intended message from both the parables and the proverbs.

### **Proverbial Wisdom in the *Parables of Kierkegaard***

The parables in the book of *Parables of Kierkegaard* talk differently. The parables begin with a question, and the answer to the question is the parable told by Kierkegaard. These parables include proverbs, which provide advice in various contexts.

**“I would rather be a swineherd, understood by the swine, than a poet misunderstood by men” (Oden 04).**

The proverb is used in the parable *The Victims of Phalaris*. The parable answers the question, what is a poet? While answering the question, Kierkegaard explained the work of a poet. What a poet felt inside and how words became poetic. Kierkegaard said that a poet has agony in mind, but his lips are designed so that when words come out, they sound sweet to others. A poet is compared to the victims of Phalaris who were imprisoned in brazen bulls tortured on the slow fire and whose cries sounded like sweet music to the tyrant Phalaris. Similarly, people gathered around a poet and requested him to sing just as they expected the poet to be tormented from within, and the agonies resulted in sweet music. In addition, there were critics to judge the poet. With all these experiences, Kierkegaard compared poets and critics. A critic is just like a poet, but he lacks the suffering in his heart and music on his lips. The proverb indicates Kierkegaard's resentment towards being a poet. Others always misunderstood the poet as they did not know the sufferings of a poet. The proverb is made of “a swineherd”, “understood by swine”, “than a poet”, and

“misunderstood by men”. Thus, the proverb suggests that it is better to be understood by fools than misunderstood by clever.

**“What is left for the philosopher to do when a society is preparing for war?”** (Oden 05).

The proverb is used as a rhetorical question to the parable *The Busy Philosopher*. The parable is the story of the philosopher Diogenes. The city of Corinth was threatened to be barricaded by Philip; everyone started preparing for the war. Some started polishing weapons, collecting stones, and others repairing walls. Seeing everyone busy preparing for battle, the philosopher Diogenes also tightened his clothes around himself and started moving his tub on the streets. When he was asked about it, he said that he wanted to be as busy as everyone else; otherwise, he was the only idle person in the town. The proverb and the parable indicate that the people in Corinth were busy preparing for war, and Diogenes had nothing to do, so he kept himself busy rolling the tub on the streets. The proverb is made of “What is left for the philosopher”, and “when a society is preparing for war”. Thus, the proverb suggests that nothing is left for a philosopher to do when society is preparing for war.

**“One who throws a stone has power over it until he has thrown it, but not afterwards”** (Oden 16).

The proverb is used in the parable *The Knight's Choice* that answers what we should compare the definiteness of an either/or decision with. Kierkegaard answered the question in the form of a parable telling the story of two armies who were brought together to fight and both armies invited a particular knight to fight on their side. The knight made his choice and was beaten and arrested as a war prisoner. The knight was brought before the victorious king, and he proposed that he would fight on their side just like they wanted him to fight before the war. However, the king said that he was given a choice before the war, but now it has no value. Thus, Kierkegaard quotes the above proverb. The proverb and the parable indicate that the knight had to decide before the war to choose from the armies. He made his decision, fought, and lost the war. Now, he was a prisoner, and it was of no use on his part to propose to the victorious king that he would fight on his side. The proverb is made of “one who throws a stone”, “has power over it”, “until he has

thrown it”, and “not afterwards”. Thus, the proverb suggests that we should think before making any decision. If we think after taking a decision, it is of no use as we took the decision and we cannot change it. Thus, it reminds us to think before we proceed.

**“To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself, is the formula for all despair”** (Oden 17).

The proverb finds its place in the parable *The Lost Lover*. Kierkegaard tried to answer the question of whether despair consumes itself. The answer to the question ran into a parable. The parable is the story of a young girl who was unhappy over love. She was unhappy with her lover as he died or because he was unfaithful to her. Her sadness was not open, and she was sad over herself. She would have been free from the sorrow if she had become her lover. Now, this sadness had become troublesome to her without him. Her loneliness had become despicable to her as he was dead, or she hated it because it reminded her that she had been betrayed. If we tell such a girl that she has been hurting herself, she would reply that the real trouble was that she could not get over it. The proverb indicates that the girl was sad about herself and could not get over it as it reminded her that she had been betrayed. Thus, she was unable to get to the formula of despair. The proverb is made of “despair over oneself”, “despair to will”, “to be rid of oneself”, and “the formula for despair”. Thus, the proverb suggests that if one wants to get over self-despair, one has to understand the formula of despair and that one should be able to get rid of despair.

**“By sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken”** (Oden 28).

The proverb is used in the parable *The Lonely Horse*. The parable answered what we should compare the misunderstood suffering with. Kierkegaard asked us to assume if the animals could think and make one another understand, then what would have happened? He gave an example of a horse standing in the meadow, lifting its head and moving it. Indeed, no one understood what it meant. Still, when the two of them were there lifelong pulling a yoke, they came together at night and caressed one another by their heads, or when a horse neighed other in the woods or when they gathered in the meadows, they would understand each other. However, when a lonely horse heard a call and saw that many horses were gathering, he came there hoping that he would learn something about life. He listened carefully to what the elders told him. They said that no horse is

fortunate until he is dead, the horse is the creature subject to tragic fate, and the elders counted the sufferings they went through. Thus, the meeting ended, and the horse that came to listen to the elders became sad as he understood that zeal is reduced by the heart's sufferings. The parable and the proverb indicate that the horse came to the gathering hoping that he would get to hear something exciting. Still, he was frustrated to listen to the agonies that the elders underwent and thus became more frustrated. The proverb is made of "by sorrow", "of the heart", and "spirit is broken". Thus, the proverb suggests that the memories of suffering make someone frustrated. Therefore, such memories are not worth mentioning as someone spirited gets frustrated. To keep everyone excited, one needs to talk positively about experiences.

**"One cannot pass twice through the same stream"** (Oden 33).

The proverb is used in the parable *The Anonymous Disciple*. The parable answered the question of what the true disciple does. The parable tells the story of a philosopher Heraclitus the obscure. He put his thoughts into his writings. He once produced the above proverb. He had a disciple who went further and added that some people could not even do it once. This improvement in the statement to Heraclitus became an Eleatic statement. The disciple desired to be a disciple of Heraclitus and go further and not back to Heraclitus's position. The proverb indicates that the disciple wanted to be Heraclitus's disciple and not the position that Heraclitus left. His addition to the statement was acknowledged as an improved version of Heraclitus's statement; hence, he had already been in Heraclitus's position, and according to the proverb, one cannot go through the same position. The proverb is made of "one cannot pass twice", and "through the same stream". Thus, the proverb suggests that one cannot enjoy the same experience twice. A person is excited when he does something for the first time. When the same person goes through the same experience, it does not excite him anymore.

**"Seek and ye shall find"** (Oden 54).

The proverb finds its place in the parable *The Candidate Seeking*. The parable answered how civil religion stands for the absolute. The parable tells the story of a candidate in theology. When someone said about him that he was seeking, the candidate reached the period of his life. The answer to what he was seeking was the kingdom of God, but Kierkegaard said that the answer

was wrong. What he sought were a parish and a living. In his search, the candidate went everywhere, acclaimed himself before everyone, and when he received what he sought, at that time, the scriptural text that he read was confirmed. A candidate of theology wanted to ensure the proverbial statement mentioned above. Therefore, according to the scriptures, the candidate went after everything to prove what he believed to be true. The proverb is made of “seek”, and “ye shall find”. Thus, the proverb suggests that those who want something will get it. One has to pursue the thing no matter what, and he gets the thing.

**“It is very extraordinary that the Greeks could have reckoned among the wise men such a fool as Periander”** (Oden 60).

The proverb is used in the parable *Periander*. The parable answered whether wisdom could survive amid the hazards of power. The parable makes use of seven proverbs. The first proverb is about Periander, a son of Kypselus of the Heraclidian family. He was the heir of a tyrant king of Corinth. He was believed to talk like a wise person but behave like a fanatic. His madness was strange. Yet, it was the fact that the Greeks could have recognized such a fool, Periander, among the wise men. The proverb indicates that Periander was fanatic in behaviour but wise in speaking. If his fanatic behaviour had not been exposed, the Greeks could have listed him among the most intelligent of the people. The proverb is made of “it is extraordinary”, “the Greeks could have reckoned”, “among the wise men”, and “such a fool as Periander”. Thus, the proverb suggests that a person’s speech and behaviour give his impression. When a person speaks something and does something else, he is not believed. Thus, the proverb answers the question negatively. The following proverb is used in the same parable focussing on a different aspect.

**“Diligence accomplishes all things”** (Oden 61).

The proverb is used in the same parable. When Periander became a dictator, he differentiated himself by mercy, justice to the poor, and wisdom among learned people. He kept his word. He gave statues of God that he promised. It was just that they all were made by paying off the women’s jewels. This fits into the above proverb, which he quoted. The proverb indicates that Periander achieved everything with painstaking efforts, but the painstaking efforts were harrowing for women as he completed the statues of God with their jewellery. There is no doubt

that his actions were diligent but at the cost of others. The proverb is made of “diligence”, “accomplishes”, and “all things”. Thus, the proverb suggests that earnest efforts make everything possible. One should make painstaking efforts to achieve something. The following proverb highlights another aspect of Periander’s personality.

**“Do not that which you have to keep secret”** (Oden 61).

The character of Periander was twofold. There was a tyrant hidden behind a compassionate and wise person. Until his bold actions exhibited his real character, he was a wise and composed man. Periander was both a wise and a tyrant man. One could not understand how he was so much changed. He lived in a wrong relationship with his mother. It was before he heard his saying. The saying is the above proverb. The proverb indicates that Periander was living a life of a dual personality. He was a wise person on the one hand and a tyrant on the other hand. As a tyrant, he had an illicit relationship with his mother, but as a wise person, he advised that one should not attempt something that had to be kept secret from others. The proverb indicates that he was in a relationship with his mother, which he should not have done because he had to keep it secret. The proverb is made of “do not that”, and “which you have to keep secret”. The proverb suggests that one should not do what has to be kept secret because the truth cannot be hidden for a long time. The following proverb opened up another aspect of Periander’s personality.

**“It is better to be feared than to be lamented”** (Oden 61).

Periander followed this saying in his life. He acted according to this proverb as he was the first one who maintained bodyguards for himself and changed the government whenever he liked. He ruled the enslaved people like a dictator. The proverb indicates that Periander was a very frightened man, so he kept bodyguards for himself. He believed in the above proverb. He thought nothing was left but lament the loss when something bad happened. Thus, he took due care and stayed cautious. The proverb is made of “it is better”, “to be feared”, and “to be lamented”. Thus, the proverb suggests that one should be cautious about the possible threat. The following proverb highlights Periander’s tyrannical thoughts.

**“It is just as dangerous for a tyrant to lay down his command as to be deprived of it”**  
(Oden 61).

The proverb is used to show what Periander believed. According to him, his power as a tyrant cannot be separated from him. The proverb indicates that it is dangerous for a tyrant to surrender his authority as if to separate him from it. Thus, the proverb expresses a view in favour of power. Therefore, the question Kierkegaard was dealing with receives a positive answer as to how wisdom can survive not only among the hazards of power but also for power itself. The proverb favours power. The proverb is made of “it is dangerous”, “for a tyrant”, “to lay down”, “command”, and “to be deprived of it”. Thus, the proverb suggests that when a tyrant lays down his authority, it separates the authority from him.

**“The more lost, the less repentant” (Oden 62).**

The parable becomes true of Periander as he did not learn from the anger of God, but it was enough that the upcoming generations learned from his death. The story reiterates the occasion which led to the madness of Periander, which increased day by day and matched the saying that a man placed on his escutcheon many years later. The proverb indicates that Periander was less repentant about his losses. He lost most of the things but felt little regret about it. The proverb is made of “more lost”, and “less repentant”. Thus, the proverb suggests that a tyrant feels less repentant of his losses. The person who is not a tyrant feels more regret about the failures.

**“It is with the one who, rich in good intentions and quick to promise, retreats backwards farther and farther from the good” (Oden 71).**

The proverb is used in the parable *The Man Who Walked Backwards*. Kierkegaard tried to answer the question of why inconsistent behaviours so often accompany exorbitant professions of good intentions. The parable explained that when a man walks away from someone, it is easy to see that he turns his back and walks away, but when a person faces the person who walks away, he has to walk backward while talking to the person who walked away. When a person gets used to walking backward, assuring again and again that he is there, he fails to understand that he is distancing himself from being good. With the help of intention and promises, the person creates an impression that he is being good and needs more choices and promises to be good. The proverb



indicates that the person who has only good intentions and promises is away from good. The proverb is made of “the one who”, “rich in good intentions and quick to promise”, “retreats backwards, and “farther from the good”. Thus, the proverb advises that one should not believe a person with only good intentions and only promises. Such a person seldom follows his intentions and commitments.

**“When a debtor remains in debt so long that the debt is finally paid through having remained so long unpaid”** (Oden 74).

The proverb finds its place in the parable *The Postponed Answer*. The parable answered the question of what religion is. The parable tells the story of a Greek philosopher who was once asked about religion. The philosopher needed some time to prepare an answer, so he took some time. When the period was over, he requested some more time. Thus, he suggested allegorically that the question is unanswerable. If the philosopher had argued with himself that he took so much time, there would have been a misunderstanding that he had found the answer to the question by now. The proverb indicates that the philosopher is a debtor who has failed to answer the question. He remained a debtor as the question remained unanswered. The proverb is made of “a debtor remains in debt”, “so long”, “the debt is finally paid through”, and “having remained so long unpaid”. Thus, the proverb suggests that when a person is in debt and takes time to pay the debt again and again and is unable to repay the debt, remains a debtor lifelong. It also suggests that one should not postpone the promised things. The more we wait, the more it becomes difficult to fulfill the promise. It reminds us that tomorrow never comes.

**“He who entertains such a fear of doing too much is not really reading the letter from his beloved”** (Oden 80-81).

The proverb is used in the parable *The Letter*. The parable answered whether there are any limitations in viewing the scriptures as an object of literary-historical investigation. The parable exemplified the story of a lover who received a letter from his beloved. The letter to the lover was as important for the lover as the words of God. Thus, the letter had to be read just like the words of God ought to be read. If the letter was written in a language that the lover could not understand, then how he could read it? He did not have access to any translator, nor did he want anyone to get

to his love secrets. So, how could he read it? He had only one way of reading the letter. He had to sit with the dictionary and understand words. When he was reading the letter, his friend came and saw him reading the letter. He asked him if this was the way to read the letter from his lover. He told him that he was impatient to read the letter, so he sat down to translate it. He scorned his friend yet told him to stay till he finished the translation of the letter. The lover somehow read the letter and got to the meaning. Such letters contained the desires a lover expected him to do. The lover went with what she asked him to do, and when they met, his lover told him that was not what she told him to do. He misunderstood what she wrote in the letter. The lover would regret that he should have interpreted what she said precisely by referring to more dictionaries. The story asks us if we believed that he regretted his misinterpretation or was less in favour of his beloved. Another explanatory story of students who were asked to read a passage from the book illustrates the proverb. One student did not know how long would it take to read the lesson, but he read it twice. Another student started finding out how much he had to study. Thus, he went to other students and wasted his time. Therefore, if the lover does too much to understand the letter, he will be less pleased as he needs to make too much effort to read the letter. The lover is like the second student who found out first how much he had to read. The proverb indicates that the person who keeps the fear of doing too much does not do it. Just like the second student who feared how much he had to read, he failed to read at all. The proverb is made of “he who entertains”, “fear of doing too much”, “is not really reading”, and “the letter from his beloved”. Thus, the proverb suggests that a person afraid of doing too much fails to do it thoroughly. Therefore, one need not look for how much is required to do. One has to start doing it. The proverb advises us to do our duties without expecting results.

**“He who is not alone with God’s Word is not reading God’s Word”** (Oden 81).

The same parable uses the above proverb. In the parable, Kierkegaard continues with the story of a lover reading the letter. He was interrupted by a friend. He was impatient to read the letter, but he said he had been slow in his work; otherwise, it was not that important. When someone comes to meet when we are reading a letter, it is a disturbance. The proverb thus indicates that the person was disturbed by another when he was reading a letter from his lover. In such a condition, he is not reading the letter at all. The proverb is made of “he who is not alone “, “God’s

Word”, and “not reading God’s Word”. Thus, the proverb suggests that one cannot concentrate on the work at hand when there is a disturbance.

**“He who is merely destined to serve in a humble capacity goes to school only a short time. But the one who is destined for something higher, must go to school for a long time” (Oden 94).**

The proverb is used in the parable *The Lifelong Schooling*. The parable answered the question of how much time we may justifiably spend on the education of the human spirit. The parable tells us that the lowest animals are born in a moment and die at that exact moment. Humans are the ones who grow slowly. A knowledgeable person knows that man is the noblest of the creations. Humans also have a similar inclination towards education. The time spent on education significantly impacts the aim for which one aspires. If something lasts for a long time in human life, schools must educate something higher, just like suffering. If we consider that someone goes to school for a lifetime, then someone might ask when something good will be achieved from the education. The teacher explains to the students not to be impatient as they have an entire life ahead. In the same way, the sufferer is advised not to be impatient as there is plenty of time for learning. The proverb indicates that a person who serves humbly goes to school for a short period, and those who deserve something higher have to go to school for a longer time. The proverb is made of “he who is destined”, “to serve in a humble capacity”, “goes to school”, “short time”, “one who is destined”, “something higher”, “must go to school”, and “long time”. Thus, the proverb suggests that those who serve humbly go to school for a short period, and those who aim for something higher, go to school longer. In a way, it shows that someone with intellectual work goes to school for a longer time, and others with not much intellectual work involved go to school for a shorter time.

**“Happy the man who possesses no more than he is content to put in the next drawer” (Oden 99).**

The proverb finds its place in the parable *The Girl of Sixteen and the Man of Twenty-five*. The parable deals with the question of what the happiest existence is. The parable tells the story of a sixteen-year-old girl who is innocent, pure, and possesses nothing, not even a chest of drawers

but uses her mother's desk to keep her belongings. She knew how to dance but went to the ball only twice a year. She sat quietly at her work and found time to look at him. He had nothing, yet she was the whole world for him even though she had nothing. The parable also points out an unhappy rich man. The proverb indicates that even though the sixteen-year-old lady had nothing and the man who shared a wardrobe had nothing; they were happy with whatever they had. On the contrary, the rich man was unhappy even though having everything. The proverb is made of "happy the man", "who possesses no more", and "than he is content to put in the next drawer". Thus, the proverb suggests that the man who is satisfied to put something in the next drawer is the happiest. As explained by another proverb, happiness is a state of mind. Thus, whoever is satisfied with whatever they have is a happy person.

**"Money makes virtue, it is certain also that money makes vice" (Oden 110).**

The proverb is used in the parable *A Possibility*. The parable explained the power of possibility. The possibility could affect someone's entire life; even if it was the possibility of a distant, uncertain event. The parable tells the story of a strange man who was a bookkeeper. The man was normal to everyone, from the poor to the rich. He greeted everyone who greeted him, but one thing that was strange about him was that he never replied to a greeting between eleven and twelve. He was also a good painter, but his paintings never saw the light of the day. He was the son of a government employee who lived in modest conditions. The man started working for a merchant at an early age. He was quiet and shy but did his work honestly, and therefore he was promoted to the position of head of the house. While working with the merchant, he utilized his spare time reading and developing his passion for drawing. Later, he became an accountant and received an excellent salary. Thus, with the money he received, he enjoyed it for some time. Two clerks took him with them and spent some time at the party. At once, he was taken to the places where a woman was given money for her despicableness. Later, he became sick. The proverb indicates that the man earned some money and became a man with vice. He got into the company of evil men and went to the place where his type of men never went. The proverb is made of "money makes virtue", "it is certain also", and "money makes vice". Thus, the proverb advises that money can make a man virtuous and unrighteous. Therefore, one needs to be aware of the extremes of having money. The following proverb highlights another aspect of his life.

**“No man, not even the married man, can know definitely how many children he leaves behind him”** (Oden 116).

The man inherited the property his master left behind as he did not have any children. He only has a cousin who lives with the bookkeeper. The bookkeeper befriended a retired captain of the ship. They used to meet in a coffee shop. The captain used to come there regularly, but the bookkeeper went there only every fourteenth day. The cousin of his master was a wise person and always quoted the above proverb. He never understood the meaning. Finally, the bookkeeper also died after being ill for several days. His excellent work remained behind in the form of blessings to the poor and the children for whom he did so much. The proverb symbolically indicates that the bookkeeper did many things for children, and the cousin of the master could not hold himself from quoting the proverb. Even though the bookkeeper was not married, he did not know how many children he had left behind. The proverb is made of “no man”, “even the married man”, “can know definitely”, “how many children”, and “he leaves behind him”. Thus, the proverb suggests that the person with his good deeds never knows how many children he has left behind. When someone does something good for other children, they become his children, not in the biological sense but in the sense of humanity.

**“No sooner said than done”** (Oden 126).

The proverb finds its place in the parable *The Wife of the Orientalist*. The parable answered the question of the difference between marriage and courtship. The parable is the story of a learned man from Holland, an orientalist. One day when he was called for lunch, he did not come. His wife waited at the dinner table with food, but he did not come. Finally, she went to his room to call him for dinner. When she went into his room, she found him alone, engrossed in his oriental studies. She went to him and asked why he did not come for dinner. He told her that he was busy observing something unusual that he had never seen before. He tried to explain to her, but she saw it and blew it, and the dot disappeared. The dot was a grain of snuff. Thus, the man ran to the dinner table along with his wife happily. The proverb indicates that the wife blew the dot as soon as she said it. Thus, it disappeared. The man had been studying it closely, but it was not worth studying as it was a grain of snuff. The proverb is made of “no sooner said”, and “than done”. Thus, the proverb suggests that one must act as soon as something is said.

## Conclusion

To sum up, I have observed that the proverbs are directly infused in the parables of Kierkegaard. The context for the exemplified proverbs in the respective parables is explained to understand the background. The parable and the related proverb correlate with one another. While studying the parables and the proverbs, it is found that the words in some proverbs are different than the relative context of the parables, yet the proverbs correspond to the circumstances of the parables. In the case of some parables, the proverbs indicate the contrary message. It becomes clear from the above study that parables give life lessons through the proverbs. It is not the case with parables where reading a proverb enables us to reach the parable's message. The message in the proverbs and the parables depends on the specific contextual components. Hence, the context of the proverb has to be understood around the entire parable to explore the proverbial wisdom.

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