

Wise Living

The week before last, 'Ofa and I saw the movie "Darkest Hour" about Winston Churchill's elevation to prime minister of Great Britain just as Adolf Hitler's Nazi armies had over-run Europe and were threatening to invade England. Throughout his time in office Churchill was somewhat controversial and faced opposition from even his own party. Churchill exemplified principled integrity, respect, and wit in the face of opposition. During his last year in office, he attended an official ceremony. Several rows behind him two gentlemen began whispering. "That's Winston Churchill." "They say he is getting senile." "They say he should step aside and leave the running of the nation to more dynamic and capable men." When the ceremony was over, Churchill turned to the men and said, "Gentlemen, they also say he is deaf!"

He was filled with witty and often wise sayings, like: "Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts." I admire his insight into history and human nature, and his ability to wisely steer a course through times of anxiety and conflict. His was a practical kind of wisdom; an understanding that leads to wise living. That's what the book of Proverbs is all about. For the next several weeks we're going to give our focus to this book of the Bible so often overlooked. So what is this book all about?

The Nature of Proverbs

When I begin reading from Proverbs here's what comes to my mind: "Too soon old, too late wise." I should have been absorbing this book's wisdom when I was much younger. But then, as is so often the case, when you're younger you're not interested.

Proverbs is a book that deals with the theory and practice of wisdom. It's the kind of wisdom that comes from God and is characterized by insight, knowledge of divine truth, and the resolution to thoughtfully apply these qualities. Wisdom is God's gift to us and is developed by a constant search for divine truth. "*The Lord gives wisdom. Knowledge and understanding come from his mouth,*" Proverbs 2:6.

Although written some 3000 years ago, the Book of Proverbs is amazingly relevant today, filled with practical and down to earth advice. [The book of Proverbs belongs to a group of old testament books known as the "wisdom literature," which includes Job and Ecclesiastes. Each book deals with wisdom in a different way, but Proverbs contains considerably more teachings and sayings specifically about wisdom than these other books combined, along with many exhortations to gain wisdom.] Where memorization is a method of teaching (as in ancient Israel), short statements that distilled great truths into a few words was most helpful. A well-turned phrase is easier to remember than a complex law or theological doctrine.

A Proverb is a short statement that takes the place of a long explanation. For example: "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush;" "early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise." Most cultures and languages have proverbs. I used to know more from Tonga, like "Sai ange sinaki, 'i he toki" (better to be prepared than do it last minute).

The difference, however, with the proverbs from the Bible, is that they teach us how to live life skillfully from God's point of view. For example: "*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight,*" Proverbs 3:5-6. Or this one: "*Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it,*" Proverbs 22:6. The proverbs of the Bible are principles, not promises, telling us how live in a godly manner through the choice of the best ends, and of the best means for their attainment.

Right Knowledge

Living in a godly manner means choosing the right goals for your life, and using the best avenues to reach those goals. This is about right knowledge – the knowledge that comes from God. *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline,”* Proverbs 1:7 I suppose you could call this the theme of the book of Proverbs. It is repeated in Proverbs 9:10, *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”*

Let’s look at that first verse, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”* The most important word here is “beginning”. Remember last week’s message that explained the connection between Creation and Christmas, between Genesis and the Gospel of John? The first words of both those books are “In the beginning.” There’s three things this word “beginning” means:

1. It means that which is the first priority, that which is basic or foundational.
2. It means that which is the essence or central truth of something.
3. It means the capstone or the ultimate goal of something.

And what is the fear of the Lord? It is not cringing terror. It is respecting God for who He is; it is understanding that God is God, and you are not. He made the world and it runs according to His plan. Respect for God is where knowledge begins, it is where knowledge continues, and it is where all knowledge ends up. So, if you seek wisdom you must begin with reverence for God, for God is foundational, is the central core, and really the ultimate goal of wisdom. An attitude of devotion to God is essential to becoming wise in the ways of living rightly.

The last part of the verse is the contrast: *“Fools despise wisdom and discipline.”* There are about five different words in the book of Proverbs that are translated by the word fool. Why so many fools? You’ve maybe heard the old saying: “What’s the difference between genius and stupidity? Genius has its limits.” There is the young fool, the naive fool, the gullible fool, the angry fool and so on. And there is the arrogant, stubborn, hard-headed fool who will not listen to anybody’s advice. That’s the word used here. Three things to be said about this kind of fool: 1) He doesn’t know what he is doing and; 2) He doesn’t care;) and, he isn’t willing to learn.

There is nothing wrong with saying, “I don’t know.” The wise man will say that all the time. “I don’t know, would you teach me?” “I don’t know, but I’d like to learn.” “I don’t know. Can you help me?” But the fool says, “I don’t know, I don’t care, I don’t want to learn anything, and you can’t teach me.”

Virtuous Living

Lack of virtue is the cause of so much of what is wrong in society. Yet God desires that His people be a holy people, to live in discernment and prosperity, pursuing ethical and moral behavior as a consistent witness to value of obedience to Him. God’s people are to live virtuous lives and spread virtuous influence throughout society. The moral teachings of proverbs are meant to relate the believer’s faith successfully to life in society. With divine wisdom the believer can confidently address today’s social and economic concerns. *“If you are afraid of people, it will trap you. But if you trust in the Lord, He will keep you safe,”* Prov. 29:25.

“... the Lord gives wisdom, and from His mouth come knowledge and understanding,” Prov. 2:6. Seeking after God will develop your moral insight. The pearls of wisdom in this book are *“For acquiring a disciplined and prudent life”* Prov. 1:3. You might translate this phrase to mean you have some “street smarts” and know how to get things done. But it’s more than getting things done the world’s way, it means getting things done in a godly manner so that you’re *“Doing what is right and just and fair,”* Prov. 1:3. Proverbs is about learning what God has said about what is right and wrong. It is practical, down to earth teaching about how you ought to treat people, how you ought to live, how your behavior ought to be different if you call yourself a believer in Jesus Christ. For a world that has lost its way, God provided this book to show us the right way. The wisdom of Proverbs will develop virtuous people who will bless all those around them.

Prudent Living

To follow the way of divine wisdom will bring numerous benefits to your living. That doesn't mean you'll never make a mistake. It just means you'll know how to avoid many of the pitfalls of life and relationships that bring you and others much trouble. Along the way you'll gain mental alertness: *"For understanding words of insight"* and *"For understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise,"* Prov. 1:6. By reading this book you'll be sharper mentally than you are right now.

You'll also begin to really grow up. *"For giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young. Let the wise listen and add to their learning. Let the discerning get guidance"* Prov. 1:4-5. The simple are not those of low I.Q. or mental deficiency. Here it refers to those who are naïve, gullible, or those who simply don't learn from their mistakes. Unfortunately, there are people who make the same mistakes over and over again throughout life. They get into the same bad relationships over and over again. They make the same bad investments over and over again. They say the same foolish things over and over, they hurt their friends the same way, they make promises they break, they start out trying to do something but they bite off more than they can chew and they have to back off over and over again. Maybe you know somebody like that, or maybe you are like that. This book will teach you how to break the cycle of wrong decisions. It will teach you how to get on the right path.

If you follow the Lord from the time you're young, by the time you're old you'll be wise. You may start out foolish, or arrogant, or selfish, but the older you get, the wiser you ought to become. It's not strictly chronological. But past age 30, say, you ought to wise up and start living the way God says you ought to live. For some it takes longer. That's why this book is here—to help the young know how to grow up morally, ethically, and spiritually.

Benefits of Wisdom

What can you take away from this introduction to the book of Proverbs? Here's my takeaway:

A. The wisdom offered in this book leads to a temple, not a palace. The quest for true wisdom leads back to God. Any quest or learning that leads away from God and his Word is headed in the wrong direction. All true learning begins with the understanding that there is a God to whom all of us must one day give an account.

B. Education that leaves out God omits the central principle of the universe. Many of those who founded our public school system years ago, if they were not practicing Christians, at least believed in Judeo-Christian principles and the truth of the Bible as a foundation for learning. That is why if you go back to the 19th century and look at the McGuffey Readers, you'll see that they taught the ABC's like this: "A—All have sinned," "B—believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," "C—confess your sins and you will be forgiven." Education had a biblical foundation.

What would happen if a teacher taught that way today in a public school? I liked the way my son's sixth grade teacher used quotes to help teach ancient history. He had up on the board a proverb from the Bible, with the ascription "King Solomon." Go to the public schools in Tonga and it is not unusual to see Bible quotes in poster print or written on the blackboard.

You may teach reading, writing and arithmetic, but if God left out, you've left out the most important thing. When you take God out of the equation, there is really no basis for a moral conscience. That's why bringing your children here to Sunday school is all the more important than ever before. God, Creator & Redeemer, is the One who brings order out of chaos and when you take God out of the educational system, out of society, what you get is chaos. No crime legislation, no bureaucratic solution can solve the problems of our society. Our society's ills will be healed only when we come back to what the Bible taught 3000 years ago: *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."*

To every Christian teacher, staff member, coach, and administrator in public schools I say God bless you. You are missionaries. Yes, I support Christian Schools – our church has one, our preschool - and I am also behind all those working in the public schools. Education is invaluable. But here's the truth: you can be an intellectual genius and still be a spiritual moron, an intellectual giant but a moral midget. All the book learning and all the degrees in the world are of no avail if you have not the fear of the Lord. Without reverence for God you're still in spiritual kindergarten.

C. God blesses those who build their lives on the firm foundation of His eternal truth. I believe that and I encourage you to do it. *"If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you..."* Proverbs 9:12. Diligence in seeking God's wisdom will blossom in your life, in time.

There are 31 chapters in the book of Proverbs, one for each day of the longer months. I have read that the great evangelist Billy Graham has made it his life-long habit to read one chapter of Proverbs each day. Just think of the wisdom he's absorbed over the years. If you and I began that practice today, just think of the wisdom we could gain in the coming year. Let's do it. Let's go back to God's word and let's get wisdom.

"... then you will understand how to have respect for the Lord. You will find out how to know God," Proverbs 2:5.