

Wise Living

One of Winston Churchill's witty and wise sayings was: "Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts." His was a practical kind of wisdom; an understanding that leads to wise living. That's what the book of Proverbs¹ is all about. For the next several weeks I'll dip into this book to see what wisdom we can find.

Proverbs: Who Needs Them?

When I begin reading from Proverbs here's what comes to my mind: "Too soon old, too late wise." I should have been reading this book when I was much younger. But then, when you're young you think, "who needs it?" - you're not interested.

Proverbs is a book about wisdom that comes from God through knowledge of divine truth. *The Lord gives wisdom. Knowledge and understanding come from his mouth*, Proverbs 2:6. It's also about the determination to thoughtfully apply that truth to life. Wisdom is developed through practice.

Although written some 3000 years ago, the Book of Proverbs is amazingly relevant today. It is filled with short statements that distilled great truths into a few words, which could easily be memorized. A Proverb is a short statement that takes the place of a long explanation. Most cultures and languages have proverbs, like these from America: "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," or "early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise." I used to know a few 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. The very first chapter tells us the purpose of the book of Proverbs: *... for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair...* Proverbs 1:2-3.

The proverbs of the Bible are principles, not promises, telling us how to live in a godly manner. In this era of social and political conflict, and children being exposed to all kinds of harmful images and ideas, one of the most important things we can do is inculcate virtue in our children and grandchildren. Character is more important than skin color. Instilling traits of character in children - like honesty, compassion, courage, perseverance, fidelity to commitments - is an invaluable practice that can save a society. This is what Proverbs teaches, aiming for the best, using the best means.

Right Knowledge

Living in a godly manner, which brings fulfillment in life, is about right knowledge. Right knowledge 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.*

The first words of both Genesis and the Gospel of John are: "In the beginning." Beginning means starting point, first priority, core truth. And what is the fear of the Lord? It is not cringing terror. It means respect and reverence for the One who created you and everything in the world. Only God is God. This is the foundation of true knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom must begin with knowing God for who He really is.

That's contrasted with this: Fools despise wisdom and discipline. Maybe you've heard the old saying: "What's the difference between genius and stupidity? Genius has its limits." We have all probably met at some time a young fool, a naive fool, a gullible fool. Maybe we've been one of those fools at some point in our lives. In Proverbs the fool is one who won't listen to anyone's guidance. It's the arrogant "know-it-all" who is not "teachable." The wise person has no trouble saying, "I don't know, but I'll find out," or "I don't know but I'd like to learn."

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, pursuing ethical and moral behavior. That's what makes for a good and prosperous society. The moral teachings of proverbs are meant to guide believer's successfully through life.

*... 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. 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 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. There is great advice for parents to instruct their children who face peer pressure. *My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent... they ambush their own lives. So are the ways of everyone who gains by violence; it takes away the life of its possessors, Prov. 1:10, 18-19. Choose your friends wisely... 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.*****

Benefits of Wisdom

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. Usually, the benefits are seen in the rear-view mirror of life. They accrue over time when you make it a habit to seek God's wisdom.

Following the way of wisdom will help you 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.*

Following the way of wisdom will help you to know when to speak and when it is wise to remain silent. "Better to remain silent and appear the fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt."

Following the way of wisdom will teach you humility that prevents you from unwisely meddling in the affairs of others. “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

Following the way of wisdom will give you confidence in God and courage to help others in need.

Divine wisdom arms the faithful to 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.*

Divine wisdom will help you 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. It’s those who are naïve, gullible, and often taken advantage of. It also refers to those who can’t seem to learn from their mistakes. Have you known people who make the same mistakes over and over again throughout life? They get into the same bad relationships time after time. They make the same bad investments. They say the same foolish things; they hurt their friends the same way; they make promises they cannot keep; they try to do something big, for a good reason, but it’s more than they can handle, and they end up disappointing others. 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 diligently, 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 as you age you ought to wise up and start living the way God says you ought to live. Some take longer than others. That’s why this book is here—to help all people know how to grow up morally, ethically, and spiritually.

The Main Thing Must Remain

For this to happen the main thing must be reinforced through ongoing education. Wisdom’s central principle is God, and if you leave God out, your quest for wisdom will falter. When many of our public-school systems were instituted the teachers, administrators, and school boards were made up of those who, if they were not practicing Christians, at least believed in Judeo-Christian principles and the truth of the Bible as a foundation for learning. Go back to the 19th century and look at the McGuffey Readers that were used in many schools. 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.

Every Christian teacher – from preschool to university - has my support and sympathy. It’s tough these days when God is left out of public schooling. Teachers are saddled with topics and subjects that are mandated to be taught go counter to our biblical understanding of life and truth. God bless you, especially, as you find ways to speak for God’s truth in such an environment. 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.” Thank God for the teachers who are (or have been) involved in the “Good News Clubs” at their schools. God bless them and the principals who allow it on campus.

Parents, now more than ever, we must teach God's truth and wisdom to our children. It most likely will not be reinforced in schools and pop culture. That's why church is so important. If the younger generations do not receive good, wise, godly teaching they are easily led astray, and then all of society suffers. Much of the ills in our society cannot be solved with more legislation or more money. Politics cannot address problems of the heart. 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.

Yes, I do support Christian schools – we have one here at this church: our First Experiences Preschool. All our teachers take a class on the basics of the Christian faith, and all use a Christian curriculum, teaching God's truth along with basic academics and of course social relationships. At the same time, I support and encourage every Christian teacher, staff member, coach, and administrator in our public schools. In many ways you are missionaries and you need our prayers. Like you, all of us would be wise to remember that without reverence for God we're still in spiritual preschool.

Those who build their lives on the firm foundation of God's eternal truth will be blessed. I believe it and encourage you to believe it. *If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you...* Proverbs 9:12. I cannot tell you exactly what those blessings will be, they often appear in the midst of situations and relationships, and often in ways you would not have foreseen. Perseverance in seeking God's wisdom will blossom in your life, in time.

Finally, the genuine quest for true wisdom will lead us to our heavenly Father's house. Any quest or learning that leads away from God and his Word is headed in the wrong direction. You can be an intellectual giant, and yet still a moral midget, if you have not sought God's truth. All true learning begins with the understanding that there is a God to whom all of us must one day give an account.

I have read that the great evangelist Billy Graham had made it his life-long habit to read one chapter of Proverbs each day (don't know how accurate that is). Just think of the wisdom he 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.

¹ 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.