

"TO KNOW WISDOM"

I. Introduction

- A. Proverbs is the most practical book in the entire Bible, but it is a book that needs to be read in a particular way.
1. The literary form of Proverbs is poetry, and if you want to appreciate a piece of poetry, you have to be willing to spend some time pondering it.
 2. Poets are not interested in simply conveying information.
 3. On the contrary, poets purposely communicate their ideas in an indirect manner, forcing us to slow down and reflect upon what they are saying.
 4. They often keep saying the same thing in slightly different ways.
 5. If we want to get the most we can out of the book of Proverbs, we need to cultivate the habits of patience and reflection.
 6. It would be a worthwhile endeavor to choose a few proverbs to commit to memory so that you can recite and ponder them as you go about your day.
- B. Because of the unique nature of the book of Proverbs, I am not going to be preaching straight through it as I do in other sermon series.
1. I may end up handling the first nine chapters that way, but it would be too difficult to do so with chapters 10-31, which is largely a collection of individual proverbs.
 2. Instead, I will identify some of the key themes in Proverbs and will preach on the various things that the book has to say about these themes.

- C. Tonight, as we study the prologue of Proverbs, our focus will be upon the subject of wisdom in general.
1. What is wisdom? How is it obtained? Who needs it? What is its foundation?
 2. These are the questions that are addressed in the passage that is before us tonight.

II. The Nature of Wisdom

- A. The opening verse of Proverbs identifies Solomon as the compiler of this collection of the sayings of the wise.
1. Much of the book was written by Solomon himself, though some sections are identified as the work of other authors, such as Agur (ch. 30) or Lemuel (ch. 31).
 2. A proverb is simply a short, memorable saying that expresses some truth.
 3. Because Proverbs was composed in Hebrew, it employs the key feature of Hebrew poetry, which is not rhyme but parallelism.
 4. In parallelism, the poet matches or echoes one thought with another parallel thought.
 5. The second line in the pair somehow develops the idea that is introduced in the first line, sometimes by expanding on it, sometimes by setting something in contrast to it.
 6. It should also be noted that while proverbs are observations about what usually happens in life, they are not a promise of what will always happen in every situation.
- B. The purpose of the book is stated in verse 2: “to know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight.”

1. In the Bible, 'wisdom' is not just a matter of head-knowledge.
 2. Biblical wisdom is immensely practical.
 3. It is skill for living.
 4. It is about learning how to navigate life and its many nuances.
 5. This helps us to understand a passage like Proverbs 26:4-5, where it says, "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself", and then in the very next verse it says, "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes."
 6. Which is it?
 7. Should we answer a fool according to his folly or not?
 8. Well, it depends on a variety of factors, and you need wisdom to discern which approach you should take in the specific encounters you have with fools.
- C. We can learn a great deal about the nature of wisdom simply by looking at the nouns that are used in this passage.
1. The Hebrew term 'insight' has to do with the ability to discern between good and evil.
 2. 'Wise dealing' means knowing how to conduct the practical aspects of your life in an appropriate manner.
 3. The words 'righteousness,' 'justice,' and 'equity' speak to the moral aspects of wisdom.
 4. 'Prudence,' which can also be translated as 'shrewdness,' is a matter of having good tactics as you make your way through life.

5. 'Discretion' is the ability to see through temptations so that you don't get suckered in by every trap that comes your way.
6. Wisdom enables us to understand 'riddles,' or make sense of life's mysteries.
7. As you can see, wisdom is highly useful.
8. That is the point that Solomon wants to impress upon us here.
9. As he speaks of the nature of wisdom, he also wants us to see the value of wisdom so that we will do whatever it takes to obtain it.

III. The Means of Obtaining Wisdom

- A. This brings us to our second point: what this passage has to say about how wisdom is obtained.
 1. Notice that the word 'instruction' appears three times in these verses, and the synonym 'learning' appears one more time.
 2. 'Instruction' is training.
 3. This is emphasized by the verbs that are used in the passage: receive, give, hear, obtain.
 4. Instruction something that has to be listened to and received.
 5. It is something that has to be given.
 6. If you want to obtain wisdom, you are going to have to work for it.
 7. It doesn't just happen.

8. Think of the hours of practice that are required for a virtuoso musician to be able to play his instrument with such mastery.
 9. Think of the training that is necessary for a runner to be able to run a marathon.
 10. You need to be willing to make that kind of investment if you want to obtain wisdom.
 11. Like anything else worth pursuing, it takes time and effort and patience to become wise.
 12. There is, however, one crucial difference.
 13. While there are many pursuits in life that are optional, the pursuit of wisdom is one that you do not want to neglect.
 14. As we will see in a few moments, the only other option if you are not pursuing wisdom is to be a fool.
- B. The other thing that these verses tell us about the means of obtaining wisdom is that we need wise people to instruct us.
1. This is suggested by the phrases 'words of insight' and 'the words of the wise.'
 2. We obtain wisdom by listening to the words of those who have traveled the path of wisdom before us.
 3. Children need to listen to the words of their parents.
 4. Students need to listen to the words of their teachers.
 5. Christians need to listen to the words of elders and pastors, as well as the words of the many wise saints who have lived in days gone by.
 6. This is a key theme in Proverbs, and it highlights the fact that we aren't born wise.

7. As one commentator puts it, "No one left to himself ever arrives at wisdom." [Kitchen]
8. We need to realize that there are people who know better than we do because they are farther ahead of us on the path of wisdom.
9. We need to listen to these people if we want to become wise ourselves.

IV. Who Needs Wisdom

- A. As for the question of who needs wisdom, two categories of people are mentioned in verses 4 and 5.
 1. First, there are those who are described as 'the simple' and 'the youth.'
 2. While there is a distinction between the two, both fit into the general category of those who are lacking in life experience.
 3. In Proverbs, the simple person is someone who is gullible and naive, aimless and unstable.
 4. And the young person is characterized as a someone who is in need of instruction and guidance.
 5. Both the simple and the young need to listen to the instruction of those who know more about life than they do.
- B. This points to one of the great tragedies of our culture.
 1. The young are being told that they do not need to look to their elders for wisdom.
 2. And the old are being told that they need to look and act like the young.
 3. Ours is a culture of perpetual adolescence.

4. As the refrain of a popular song declares:

Tonight

We are young

So let's set the world on fire

We can burn brighter than the sun [Fun, "We Are Young"]

5. Youth is everything in our culture.
6. Don't let yourself be duped by this mindset.
7. It is a lie that you need to see through.
8. Youth is not the measure of what is wise and good and true.
9. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with being young.
10. Childhood can be a wonderful stage of life.
11. But let us never forget, as our culture has forgotten, that the whole point of childhood is to grow up.
12. Young people need instruction, and old people need to be mature enough to give it to them.

- C. The second category of people who need wisdom are those who are already wise, those who already understand.

1. In other words, the short answer to the question of who needs wisdom is "everyone."
2. It doesn't matter how old you are, it doesn't matter how long you have been a Christian, you need more wisdom than you currently possess.
3. Do not let yourself coast through your later years.

4. Don't think that you pretty much know everything that you need to know.
5. You don't.
6. You still have a race to finish, and you need wisdom to know how to chart your course.
7. You always need to be teachable.

V. The Beginning of Wisdom

A. This brings us to verse 7, which summarizes the theme of the entire book: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and discipline."

1. To fear God is to have reverence and humility toward God.
2. It is to recognize your creatureliness and your dependence upon God.
3. It is to acknowledge God's holiness and his perfect wisdom.
4. The person who fears God wants to learn from God.
5. He wants to know how to please God.
6. He wants to turn away from evil and surrender to God's will.

B. This verse says that the fear of the Lord is "the beginning" of knowledge.

1. This does not mean that the fear of the Lord is an elementary stage that we eventually left behind.
2. On the contrary, the fear of the Lord is the foundation of all knowledge and wisdom.
3. A foundation is something that everything else is built upon.

4. The beginning of learning to read is learning the alphabet, but you do not discard the alphabet once you learn how to read.
 5. The same thing could be said about numerals and mathematics, or musical notes and playing an instrument.
 6. We never leave the fear of the Lord behind us.
 7. It is the foundation upon which the entire Christian life is built.
- C. The second half of verse 7 sets a contrast.
1. In contrast to the person who fears the Lord is the fool.
 2. The fool closes his mind to instruction and, ultimately, to God.
 3. He is too proud to learn, thinking that he knows what is best.
 4. He has never understood what C.S. Lewis described in *Mere Christianity*: "In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that -- and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison -- you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you." [96]
- D. This contrast between the way of the wise and the way of the fool is at the very heart of the book of Proverbs.
1. There are only two ways to go in life.
 2. There is no middle path.

3. People are either on the path of wisdom or the path of folly.
4. We need to remember that we are surrounded by people who do not fear God, people who despise wisdom and instruction, people who are on the path of folly.
5. Let us take care that we do not stray onto that path.

VI. Conclusion

- A. The New Testament tells us that Jesus is “the wisdom of God.” (1 Cor. 1:24)
 1. It also tells us that as Christians “we have the mind of Christ.” (1 Cor. 2:16)
 2. Such passages show us that salvation in Christ involves being delivered from the path of folly.
- B. But this does not mean that wisdom comes to us automatically when we become Christians.
 1. We need to “be transformed by the renewal” of our minds. (Rom. 12:2)
 2. God doesn’t bring this transformation about miraculously.
 3. He brings it about through natural means.
 4. The way to know wisdom is to acknowledge that you are not perfectly wise in yourself and to be receptive to the instruction and counsel of those who are wiser than you are.
 5. This is the basic message of the book of Proverbs.